

Chapter One: A Mysterious Summons - Escape From Privet Drive

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A fierce summer thunderstorm raged across Little Whinging as the car belonging to Vernon Dursley pulled into Number Four, Privet Drive. The downpour was nothing short of torrential, and nary a few seconds passed without the steady pattering of the falling rain being interrupted by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. The overall scene, Harry Potter thought, fit his mood rather accurately. Harry was by no means a normal boy, a fact of which the Dursleys, his only living relatives and most unwilling guardians, seldom ceased to remind him.

Truly, Harry Potter was a wizard, and a right famous one at that. He had defied and defeated the terrible Dark Lord Voldemort more times than any other wizard, living or dead, earning him the moniker "The Boy-Who-Lived", a lightning bolt scar on his forehead (where Voldemort's Avada Kedavra had struck the then one-year-old Harry and rebounded, banishing the evil wizard into a mere shade) and a place in the wizarding world's history books. Alas, the resulting peace was doomed to end, as Voldemort later returned to an organic form, and used Harry's own blood to regain his former body at the end of Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and thus began his reign of terror anew. Right now, though, these things were far from the adolescent wizard's mind, as Harry slowly stepped out of his uncle's car into the pouring rain, thus officially marking the beginning of his least favorite few months of the year, those spent away from Hogwarts.

Naturally, the portly Vernon wasted no time in waddling into the house, leaving Harry to soak in the rain and carry in his belongings by hand. Harry sighed, realizing that his uncle had conveniently forgotten to leave him the keys to the trunk, meaning an extra trip into the house to get the keys, and back out into the small monsoon to get his things. Mad-Eye Moody and the Order may well have threatened the Dursleys out of taking any direct steps to make Harry's life any more miserable than it already was, but leave it to Vernon to find small ways in which to torment the young wizard regardless. Harry turned

to enter the house, almost thankful for the small irritation that had effectively halted his own inner musings, when a barely whispered Alohamora caused the car's trunk to click open.

Harry cocked his head in the direction of the spell, seeing nothing until Kingsley Shacklebolt's head appeared from under the hood of an invisibility cloak. Dumbledore's babysitters had wasted no time, Harry thought with no small amount of annoyance, which for some reason caused an itching in his upper back, but he sent a small smile (that failed to reach his brilliant green eyes) at the tall black auror regardless.

"Thanks, Kingsley."

"No problem, kid. Don't forget to send us an owl every few days letting us know you're alright. I've got to get back to my position. Take care of yourself, Harry, and try not to get yourself down too much. Sirius wouldn't have wanted that."

"I'll try. Have a nice day."

Of course, the mention of Harry's recently departed godfather sent the young man right back into his subdued mood. The tears no longer came, though, and the heart-wrenching pain that had accompanied any thought of Sirius Black for that past week or so since his untimely demise had subsided to a dull ache. Harry wondered for a moment if Sirius would have been disappointed with him for that. Deciding to simply let the matter drop for the moment, Harry opened the trunk the rest of the way and began to haul his belongings into Number Four, his own personal prison, now more so than ever before. He could see Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia peering at him through the front blinds, no doubt hoping that he'd be struck by an errant thunderbolt.

A second jaunt into the now receding downpour saw Harry loading Hedwig's cage into the house, the snowy owl raising a small ruckus at being drenched in rain.

"Sorry, Hed. I'm sure you'd rather not spend the night caged up in the walrus's car."

Hedwig responded with an annoyed hoot and a nod. Upon Harry's entry into the house, the owl decided to take the opportunity to spread her wings a bit and shake off the rainwater...right onto Uncle Vernon, who quickly turned a most unseemly shade of purple.

"BOY! Take that ruddy bird up to your room, and don't you dare come out again until we call you for supper!"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon."

Harry couldn't resist the urge to send a small smirk at his beefy uncle as he trudged up the stairs into his barren bedroom, leaving Aunt Petunia shrieking about "ungrateful brats".

Upon entering his room, Harry set Hedwig's cage down on the dresser and opened the lock before reclining down onto the rather uncomfortable bed. A quick glance out the window revealed that the storm had just ended, leaving a slight overcast in its wake. Typical, Harry thought, just when he gets inside, the storm ends. The small twinge of irritation became a large jolt when his thoughts turned to the Prophecy, the fated proclamation that sealed his fate as the one who had to stand against Voldemort in the end.

Of course, he would've fought against the serpentine bastard anyway. Voldemort had taken far too much from Harry. His parents, and his only chance at a normal life. Cedric, and with him Harry's only reasonable chance at a relationship with his first and only crush. Wait, where had THAT come from? Cedric wasn't important in and of himself; his death had only mattered to Harry because it more or less destroyed any chance of Harry having a chance with Cho? No, Harry thought, those thoughts are totally wrong. He couldn't possibly be that callous. Cho herself was another problem. Looking back, Harry knew he really ought to owl her with an apology for how he had acted over the course of the last year. For some reason, though, Harry just didn't care to.

Anyway, Harry mused, again noticing the warm, dull itch between his shoulderblades, back to Voldemort. Most recently, Voldemort had taken away the only real father figure that Harry had ever known. Well, he was indirectly responsible, anyway. The physical culprit was that madwoman Bellatrix. Righteous anger, indeed. Harry cursed

himself for his weakness, vowing that next time he would make the bitch suffer for both attempts and then some. Of course, Harry knew that he had a share in the blame as well. Sirius would never have come to the Ministry that night if not for Harry's stupid recklessness. As much as he told himself that, Harry couldn't seem to muster enough guilt to really drive the point home. Strange, he thought, seeing as he could think about nothing else even earlier that same day.

Harry absently fingered his wand, holly and phoenix feather, as his thoughts turned back to the Prophecy, and then to Dumbledore. Harry felt a fresh wave of anger at the thought of the Headmaster. His itch became more pronounced, but his face remained impassive as he continued to twirl the wand around in his hands. Dumbledore should have told him the Prophecy sooner. Should have made him aware of the fate to which he was unfortunately bound. An old man's mistake, bah! Wait, unfortunately? Hadn't he just sworn that he would have taken on Voldemort regardless? Well, yes, he would have, but maybe it would be fun to see those cowardly sheep in the wizarding world sweat about it for a while. Maybe let them think twice before making a scapegoat of him.

Harry was drawn out of these itinerant musings by a soft screech coming from his window. Looking over, he saw a large horned owl perched imperiously on his windowsill, a letter attached to its right leg, which was held out daintily in front of Harry's face. Harry took the note, and the owl flew out the window as quickly as it had come. Wasting little time, Harry opened the note:
Greetings, Mister Potter:

There is a certain matter of great importance that I must discuss with you in person. I do not often deign to meet with any individual, no matter what their station within the outside world, and as such, you may rest assured that this is no trivial matter. I apologize for the lack of detail given in this letter, but the matter in question is of a highly sensitive nature, both from your end and ours. I therefore request that you appear at Gringotts Bank in Diagon Alley, London at noon tomorrow. The attendants at the front desk will be informed that I am expecting you, so please just ask one to escort you to my office.

Sincerely,

Grilthauk the Greedy

President, Gringotts Wizard Bank: Diagon Alley Main Branch
“The President of Gringotts...? What would he want with me?”

With that voiced thought, Harry began to ponder the mysterious letter. No details given, just a summons. Awfully presumptuous, but then again, a man...well, whatever a goblin counted as, with the status of the Gringotts Bank President would likely own enough gold to make Malfoy look like a pauper. A bit of arrogance probably went with the territory. What could the letter be about, though? Harry was relatively certain that it had nothing to do with his fame. He hadn't yet met a goblin that gave a single knut about mystique of the Boy-Who-Lived. Did it have something to do with Sirius's estate? Harry doubted that his godfather's death would have been reported officially at this point, even assuming that Harry had been named as the beneficiary. Well, he thought, he wasn't going to know for sure until he got there.

Of course, that raised the real pressing issue: how indeed was he going to get there? Harry had immediately decided that he was going to the meeting. Even if the discussion with the President was of no value to him, he'd at least have the satisfaction of having defied Dumbledore. Not only was he going, mind, he had no intention of returning to Privet Drive at all. If the note was a trap set by Voldemort, Harry wasn't too worried. After all, he had the Prophecy and his own skill to protect him from the Death Eater grunts, most of the Inner Circle was stewing in Azkaban after the botched Ministry raid, and old snakeface himself wasn't about to risk a personal appearance. Still, after the dementor fiasco of the previous summer, Harry was certain that Dumbledore's babysitters would be watching Privet Drive like hawks this time around, most likely with more than one guard on duty at any given time. He has already seen Kingsley, after all. Analyzing the situation, which didn't seem to strike him as odd despite his usual impulsive style, Harry managed to come up with a workable plan relatively quickly. Part of his plan involved inducing Uncle Vernon to cooperate, so he decided to keep the great walrus as happy as possible by not gracing the Dursley family with his presence at supper. He'd go to bed early and make breakfast before the Dursleys

awoke, making sure to be around when Vernon inevitably lumbered down for his morning meal. In the mean time, Harry went for his school trunk and got out a good supply of parchment, and his quill and ink. An hour or so later, Harry turned in for bed, still annoyed by that persistent itching.

Harry's dream that particular night could only be described, in a word, as odd. He was accustomed to having his dreams hijacked by Voldemort, containing snippets of the Dark Lord's various tortures and conversations. Tonight, however, was a bit different. Harry thought he could see a hazy outline of Voldemort's serpentine figure, surrounded by several equally hazy, nearly transparent, black-robed figures that would assumedly be Death Eaters. He could hear voices, but they were muffled and generally incomprehensible. Harry thought he saw the hazy Voldemort casting the Cruciatus on some helpless underling (most likely Avery, given the poor sap's history for getting punished). Harry, despite the dream, was able to sound out the thought that Voldemort probably kept Avery around only out of need for a whipping boy. The dream began to phase out more and more, to the point that it aborted just as the nightly muggle torture was getting underway, resulting in Harry's awakening. The normal searing pain in his scar was noticeably absent, save for minor warmth. Odd, Harry mused, before falling back into sleep, this time bereft of Voldemort dreams.

Harry awoke again early the next morning, with several hours to spare before he could expect the Dursleys. He quietly trudged downstairs and headed for the kitchen, taking a moment to scowl as he passed by the cupboard under the stairs. Raiding the refrigerator liberally, he spent nearly two hours whipping up a morning feast the likes of which even Vernon and Dudley would be hard-pressed to devour. Harry had no doubt that the walrus and his blob of a son would somehow manage, though. After making a small plate for himself (though still more food than he was usually allowed at the Dursleys') eating and washing his dishes, Harry set the table and awaited the thunderous stampeding that would signal the morning arrival of his beloved family. He hadn't long to wait, as the elapse of fifteen minutes saw Vernon barreling into the kitchen, quickly followed by his wife and son. Harry's uncle purpled as he saw his nephew in the room, but the sight of the feast set before him quickly placated him.

"You missed supper last night, boy. Worthless freak, can't even show appreciation for the good food Petunia and I so graciously waste on you."

"Sorry, Uncle Vernon. I had a lot on my mind."

Dudley couldn't resist the urge to chime in.

"What would YOU have to think about, freak?"

Harry was ready with his reply.

"I was thinking about how I could get out of your hair for the rest of the summer."

This got Vernon's attention.

"Well, out with it, boy."

"I have some things I need to take care of in London today. I thought that as long as I was leaving, I might as well not bother coming back."

Vernon sputtered, spraying coffee all over the tabletop.

"Are you out of your ruddy mind, boy? You heard what those freakish friends of yours said at the station. If you leave, they'll be barreling down our front lawn within the day. No sir, I'll not have that unnaturalness in my house."

"Don't worry, Uncle Vernon. I've planned for that, see? You heard them say that they'd come calling if they didn't hear from me for a few days. I sat up last night writing up enough notes to last the summer. When I go, I'll leave my owl here. All you have to do is tie one of the notes to her leg every couple of days and let her deliver it. As long as the Order members see my owl leaving the house and delivering notes to them, they'll have no reason to suspect anything. You don't even have to feed her. Just let her out at night and she'll hunt her own food."

This time, Petunia chirped her two knuts in.

“But what if it isn’t enough for them? What if they come here looking for you?”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. They have good enough reason to give me my personal space this summer. If they do by chance come, just come clean with them and tell them exactly when I left and how. If it comes to it, tell them that I threatened you with ma...the m-word. They’ll be angry with me, of course, but it won’t have any impact on you.”

Vernon grunted out his decision. Being able to get rid of Harry along with the likely possibility of landing the boy in trouble with the freaks made it an easy decision for the chinless man.

“Very well, boy. You may leave. But don’t think that you’ll be allowed back here this summer!”

“Thanks, Uncle Vernon. I won’t need to come back. However, I will need you to drop me off somewhere between here and Grunnings when you leave for work this morning. If they see me leaving the house by foot, the entire plan is ruined.”

“Won’t they see you getting into the car? Bet you didn’t plan for that, did you, you worthless little freak?”

Harry fought down the brief urge to curse the purple walrus. The effort heralded the return of the itching in his back.

“I’ll be able to manage that far, I think. If you don’t mind, I’m going to head back upstairs and get ready to leave. Just call when you’re heading out for work. Actually, I’ll probably be downstairs first anyway. I don’t have much to do.”

Vernon only grunted his affirmation while returning to his meal, as Harry started back up to his room, hopefully for the last time in his life. Back in his room, Harry packed a decent-sized bag with everything he’d be needing for the remainder of the summer. First was a small bag containing sixty or so galleons left over from the previous school

year. Harry silently thanked himself for being frugal during fifth year, as he'd need the money now to buy a new set of robes for his meeting with the President. He wasn't about to go looking like a street urchin in front of perhaps the wealthiest being in all of the wizarding world. That, along with a few changes of undergarments and Dudley hand-me-downs for emergencies (who could say when Harry might need to pitch a tent somewhere?) had the bag packed and ready. He briefly considered bringing along his photo album, but figured that the Order would get it for him when they eventually caught onto his deception, which he hoped would be later than sooner. Harry tucked his wand into his pocket, grabbed his father's invisibility cloak, and headed over to give Hedwig her final instructions, fully expecting a thorough pecking for leaving the temperamental bird behind.

"I'm off to Gringotts, Hed. You're going to have to stay behind for awhile."

Hedwig gave an impertinent screech.

"Yes, I know, I know. It's important, though. I need to you deliver my notes for the Dursleys. If you don't, the Order will know that I'm not here. You know I wouldn't be asking you to do this if it wasn't necessary. Please, girl?"

Hedwig hooted her acquiescence, but gave Harry an annoyed nip to show her dissatisfaction.

"Thanks, Hedwig. Now, when the game is up, and the Order eventually barges into the house and heads upstairs to look for me, I want you to get out of here as quickly as possible. Fly down to Diagon Alley and find me, but make sure nobody follows you. If you can't find me, go to the Weasleys, okay?"

The snowy owl gave a slight nod to indicate understanding, and Harry ruffled her plumage before heading downstairs to wait for Vernon.

A few minutes later, Vernon came lumbering downstairs dressed in his business attire. Harry thought it made him look even more like a walrus than usual.

"You ready then, boy?"

“Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

Without another word, Vernon kissed Petunia on the cheek, ruffled Dudley’s hair, and bounded out the door. When Petunia and Dudley turned around, Harry slipped on his father’s cloak and followed directly behind Vernon, hoping that invisibility combined with his uncle’s girth would effectively hide him, and praying silently that Mad-Eye wasn’t on duty at that particular moment. It seemed to go off without a hitch, as Harry clambered into the back seat of Vernon’s company car and shut the door. Vernon didn’t bother to look back and make sure Harry was in the car before speeding off. After ten minutes or so of fast driving, Vernon came to a stop in one of the worst neighborhoods of Surrey.

“Out with you, then. You’re contaminating my car with your freakishness.”

Harry complied, and Vernon sped off without looking back. That would be the last time Harry Potter would ever lay eyes upon his boorish uncle. Harry scanned around for a well-hidden area and hailed the Knight Bus, which promptly arrived as he placed his cloak into his bag. Rearranging his hair in order to cover his scar, Harry climbed on board. Thankfully, Stan Shunpike wasn’t on duty at this particular time, greatly lessening the chance of Harry being recognized on the bus (not that Stan actually knew Harry as “Harry”, but he would rather not be recognized by anybody regardless). The conductor was a surly-looking older man. He didn’t even bother to take a glance at Harry as the latter took a seat near the middle of the bus.

“Welcome aboard the Knight Bus. Where can I take ya?”

“The Leaky Cauldron, and please make it quick.”

“Yeah, ya people are always in a hurry, aren’t ya? Bloody ridiculous, if ya ask me. It’ll be eleven sickles and a knut.”

Harry mentally sneered that he didn't ask, but said nothing. His back did start itching again, though. He got up and dropped a galleon into the bucket, not really caring about the change, and the bus took off. About thirty minutes later, the bus stopped in front of the Leaky Cauldron, and Harry got off, bag in hand. He waited until no muggles were looking, and strolled into the dingy tavern. He needed a room, so he'd have to let Tom the Barkeep recognize him, but Harry trusted the toothless old proprietor implicitly. He walked up to the bar and hailed the barkeep, while taking his money pouch out of his main bag.

"Oh, good morning, Harry. What brings you into the Alley today?"

"Some business at Gringotts, Tom. It's nice to see you, as always. Listen, I need to book a room. I'll be staying around for a few days, but I'm not sure exactly how long. Can I just tentatively book the room and pay the boarding fees when I check out?"

"Of course, Harry, that'll be just fine. You want the same room as last time?"

"Yes, that'll be wonderful. I'll probably be back by for a late lunch, but I have to be going now. Do me a favor, and place my clothing bag up in the room."

"All right, Harry. Good luck with whatever your business is."

Harry departed with a nod, left via the rear exit of the tavern, and entered Diagon Alley as normal. As he walked, he tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible, knowing that if by chance an Order member were patrolling the Alley, chances were he'd be identified regardless. After all, how many wizards had messy jet-black hair and went about in overlarge muggle clothing? Luck remained on Harry's side, as he reached Madame Malkin's Robes for All Occasions without incident. He simply strolled into the rear area of the store and looked around for a formal robe. Had he been a bit more aware of his surroundings, Harry would have seen the cute saleswitch taking sidelong glances at him as he shopped. After about half an hour of browsing, Harry decided on a formal-looking, but not overly extravagant, black silk robe with emerald green trim that matched his eye color, and a new pair of black dress shoes and socks to match.

He took his purchases and walked up to the sales counter, only to find that the girl working there was too occupied with gazing dreamily at him to notice his actual approach. Odd, he thought, he most certainly wasn't used to girls acting this way around him. With a small twinge of annoyance that again resulted in that ever-irritating itching in his upper back, he figured that she had probably seen his scar. Enthralled by the myth, not the person behind it.

"Excuse me, I'm ready to purchase if that's alright..."

The young saleswitch, a girl probably in her early twenties, blushed rather profusely at having been caught staring.

"My apologies, sir. My name is Monique, and I'll be serving you this morning.

Probably serving me in a less-than-professional fashion if you get your way, Harry thought wryly. He'd never understand the obsession with his so-called celebrity, but he had no time to pander to a lovestruck fangirl at the moment. Shame, though. She really was good-looking.

"It's alright, no problem at all. Here, these are what I'm interested in."

"Oh, excellent choice, Mr..."

Harry figured that the girl was just trying to act as if she was genuinely interested in him, but saw no need to humor her. He really was going to be late for his meeting with the President if he wasted too much more time.

"Potter, Harry Potter. I mean no offense, ma'am, but I'm rather in a hurry, so if I could just get my total and pay, I'd appreciate it."

The girl, who was genuinely unaware of Harry's identity, flushed fuchsia. Her eyes darted up to his forehead, where Harry had already revealed his scar in order to save himself the annoyance of being asked.

“OH MY GOD! Harry Potter? Oh, I am SO sorry. I would never have acted so unprofessionally had I known it was you, Mr. Potter. The total is thirty-four galleons, seven sickles, and three knuts.”

Talk about overacting, Harry inwardly groaned. She was making a complete fool of herself. He was most unpleasantly reminded of Parvati Patil. Harry decided that it really wasn't his problem either way. He removed thirty-five galleons from his pouch, received the appropriate change, and walked back into the changing rooms. Looking back to make sure the blushing saleswitch was keeping her eyes to herself (she was, having embarrassed herself thoroughly enough already), Harry changed into his new formal wear and left the clothier. Confident that his new outfit would fool any Order members that happened to be about, Harry walked toward his actual destination.

A few moments later, Harry walked through the front doors of Gringotts Bank. Looking around, Harry noted that the place looked much the same as every other time he had visited the wizard bank. Small goblins scurried about all over the place, transporting paperwork and currency about the facility. Paying no further heed to the environs, Harry walked up to the front desk and ringed. The goblin in front of him looked up at Harry with a nasty sneer that immediately vanished upon noticing the infamous scar.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Potter. The President is expecting you. Right this way, please.”

And so, Harry Potter followed the nameless goblin to the place where his meeting with the President of Gringotts Bank would take place. This meeting that would change Harry's entire outlook on both himself the world around him, and set his destiny on a course that he never would have imagined possible...

(End Chapter One)

Author's Note: Well, here it is, my official first attempt at writing a piece of fanfiction. Some of you may have seen me around as a reviewer, particularly on exotic pairing stories. I've gotten some small commendations from various authors on that particular front. On the story itself, I know that it may seem like pretty standard fare at the

moment, but I guarantee that the action and drama will begin to pick up starting with the next chapter. I realize that Harry may seem a bit out of character at the moment, particularly concerning his somewhat disjointed thoughts, lessened amount of grief about Sirius, et cetera. I promise you that I have a reason for his change in attitude, as will be seen in the upcoming two or three chapters. Please, read and review. I'd particularly like to see some thoughts and ideas about the story's direction. Simple praise is fine as well, of course. On the other hand, if anybody feels the need to flame, by all means, do so. I won't pay you any mind, but vent all you like. Chapter two should be out in two or three days, barring any unexpected setbacks.

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Chapter Two: Bloodlines – Finding His Wings

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Harry followed the goblin through a set of doors into the restricted employee area of the bank, and then up an extravagant spiraling staircase. The walk took nearly ten minutes, and Harry's legs were a bit sore by the time he and the goblin reached the top floor of the building. Harry couldn't help but wonder why Gringotts hadn't bothered to install an elevator of some kind. The thought left his mind as quickly as it had come, though, as his escort stopped directly before a set of enormous golden double doors, patterned with inlaid precious stones of various sorts. Harry's felt was that the entire scene was the very definition of pointless extravagance, but a part of him couldn't help but be impressed. Harry watched his goblin escort run a finger along the front of the right door, causing it to open with a slight creak. The goblin motioned for Harry to remain behind as he scurried into the next room, presumably to announce Harry's arrival to the President. Less than a minute elapsed before the escort returned.

"The President will see you now, Mr. Potter. Right through these doors."

Harry nodded to the goblin, which left without another word, and walked into the President's office. The office's interior was just as extravagant as the doors leading into it, with objects of gold and silver, items inlaid with jewels, and other such indicators of wealth abounds. The walls were adorned with various symbols of war: swords, axes, spears, and maces, among others, most designed small and light enough to be wielded by a goblin. Glancing over to his left, Harry saw a particularly nasty-looking spiked ball and chain suspended from the wall by a pair of stakes. Battle flags and pennants hung from the high ceilings. The overall picture, Harry thought, created a strange, but somehow fitting dichotomy of wealth and war. For some reason that

he couldn't place, Harry seemed to enjoy the sight of the weaponry. The audible sound of a throat clearing drew Harry's attention to the center of the room, where the President of Gringotts had risen from his desk and started to walk over to greet him.

The President was certainly not what Harry would have expected from what was likely by far the wealthiest being in wizarding Europe. He was an older-looking goblin, with a mane of long graying hair, but he expelled a certain aura of might that indicated even to a person as typically rash and fearless as Harry Potter that he was not to be crossed. He was dressed in a gold-plated battle hauberk, with matching gauntlets and leg armor and a short, gem-encrusted broadsword girded on his waist. Much like the surroundings, the President himself represented a mixture of affluence and war. The President presently reached Harry's location and extended a gnarled hand in welcome. Harry took it with only the slightest bit of hesitation.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. I am Grilthauk the Greedy, chieftain of the unified clans and President of Gringotts Wizard Bank. I do hope that my office decor hasn't offended you. As stated in my letter, I am rather unused to playing the host for human clientele."

Harry knew to be careful with his reply. Offending this particular individual could certainly be hazardous to his health, Prophecy or no.

"No, the surroundings are fine, only a bit different from what I'm used to, sir...?"

"You may call me Grilthauk, Mr. Potter. Out of respect for your family, I'll not insist that you refer to me by my official title."

"All right, Grilthauk. And please, call me Harry, if you don't mind."

"Very well, Harry..."

Harry briefly wondered what the goblin chieftain meant by that last statement about his family. He had certainly received no similar respect from any of the other goblins he had encountered during his five-year tenure in the wizarding world. Well, no use obsessing over

the matter, he decided. Not that he would have had the time anyway, as the President chose that moment to get down to business.

“You are no doubt wondering why I have requested your presence here today. Allow me to explain. A week or so ago, our institution learned of the passing of one Sirius Orion Black.”

So this was about Sirius, Harry mused. But how could Gringotts have known of his death so quickly? Harry was sure that the Ministry would not have released the details before fully conducting their own investigation. There was no way that investigation could be completed already.

“You see, when a wizard or witch whose last will and testament is held in trust by our institution passes away, as was the case with the newly departed Lord Black, we are immediately notified through the termination of a magical bond forged when the contract is formed. Upon personally reviewing Lord Black’s will, as is standard Gringotts procedure in cases concerning the execution of the estates of any of the old pureblooded families, I have learned that he established you, Harry, as his sole heir half a year before his untimely demise.”

Harry was only slightly shocked at the revelation that Sirius had made him his heir. Harry’s late godfather had always looked upon him as the son he never had and besides, there was nobody else for him to leave the estate to. Remus, maybe, but both the Ministry of Magic and the entirety of Sirius’s more unsavory blood relations would have never allowed a werewolf to inherit. Harry suddenly realized that he felt neither pain nor grief from this latest reminder of Sirius’s death, despite the fact that he consciously wanted to. The fact disturbed him more than a little, but pondering the matter only resulted in that itching in his back. Further, Harry was rather confused that the President had requested a personal meeting over a simple will reading and that he had painted the whole matter with such a secretive brush.

“Now, Harry, your facial expression leads me to believe that you have come to the conclusion that I have summoned you here merely to discuss the matter of the Black inheritance. That is not the case. Part of our institution’s trust with the pureblooded wizarding community

obligates us to reference the magical bloodlines of any beneficiary to the estate of one of the old families before he or she can claim the inheritance, in order to ensure that the entirety of the family's resources remains within the confines of the magical world. Our research into your mother's bloodline has yielded some degree of uncertainty."

Harry didn't know what to make of this statement.

"My mother? She was a muggleborn. Anyone who knew her could tell you that."

"Indeed, official Ministry records confirm that Lily Evans was a muggleborn witch. However, I have doubts of my own as to whether or not that is indeed the truth. I have a certain theory, Harry, and I have summoned you here today in order to either confirm or refute it. But first, I believe that we've both been standing long enough. Please, come have a seat in one of the chairs by my desk."

Harry followed the President over to his expensive wooden desk and took a seat in one of the chairs. The seat was rather uncomfortable, but Harry thought that perhaps his discomfort stemmed from his own nervousness and considerable level of indignation at his mother's bloodline being called into question by a man, well, goblin who most likely had never once met her (not that Harry had either, mind). That infernal itching in his back wasn't helping matters, either. Harry kept his eyes on Grilthauk as the goblin chieftain walked over to a small safe directly behind his desk, unlocked it and removed a small, ornate wooden box. Grilthauk took the box over to his desk and sat down before opening the box and taking out a ring and placing it on the desk before Harry. The ring was one of the most beautiful, intricately designed adornments Harry had ever seen; not that he was any expert on jewelry. The ring was of magical jade carved into the form of a coiling dragon, in whose open mouth rested a small, transparent black gem the likes of which Harry could not even begin to identify.

"Harry, please fit this ring onto your left index finger."

Harry could never have known that this small act would irreparably shatter the life he had once known, and set him onto a path of

bloodshed and darkness, one that would incite the magical war to end all wars.

Skeptical, Harry complied. No sooner than the ring was in place, did the eyes of the dragon begin to glow with an emerald green light that perfectly matched Harry's eyes. The black gem likewise began to glow, a core of pure black light radiating in the center of the transparent stone. The itching in Harry's back ceased, now replaced with a painful burning sensation that made Harry's entire being feel more alive. The dragon's coils tightened, cutting into Harry's finger, at which point his entire body began to glow with that same emerald aura as the dragon's, as Harry's eyes. The pain in Harry's back increased to the relative intensity of a localized Cruciatus, and he could literally feel the magical energy within his body changing and multiplying, straining the very fabric of his body and soul toward the absolute breaking point. He glared up at Grilthauk, pure hatred burning in his eyes.

"Damn you, goblin! What have you done to me?"

Grilthauk looked up to meet Harry's eyes, the goblin's own torn between elation and absolute terror. Grilthauk the Greedy had fought against and survived countless insurrections within his own clan and had slain many a powerful contender in order to rise to his position as chieftain. He had seen the rise and fall of three Dark Lords in his long lifetime, the first of which had attempted to storm Gringotts and use it as a base of operations. He had fought and won that battle as well. He had weathered the frequent attempts by the Ministry of Magic to interfere in the running of his bank, and usurp control over the wealth of wizarding Britain. But never in his life had he been as terrified as he found himself at that exact moment, looking headlong at the enraged Harry Potter, at the demon waiting to be unleashed within the boy. Steeling himself, he recalled the last request given him by the only human being to whom the goblin clans had ever sworn fealty, and reached into the ring's box once more, withdrawing a small vial of a sickly green potion. He could only pray to the ancestors that once it was over, that the boy would not kill him outright before allowing him to explain.

"Harry, calm yourself! The pain is only the result of the heritage ring recognizing you as its rightful and owner attempting to bond its magic

to yours. Here, this potion will numb the pain. Drink it and stay seated as it takes effect. We have much to discuss.”

Harry, desperate to relieve the pain, took the offered potion without a second thought. At that exact moment, the last hope of the light was extinguished. Harry braced himself to allow the potion to take effect, taking heart in the notion that the pain, worse even than Voldemort’s Cruciatus curse, would soon be over. How wrong he was. Instead of numbing the pain, the potion caused it to multiply tenfold. To Harry, the walls and floor of Grilthauk’s office no longer existed. He could only see pure white. Each second felt like a millennium. And then, in a moment, the threshold broke. Harry could feel the flesh exploding from his body as his consciousness waned.

Grilthauk stared in abject horror as the scene played out before his eyes. By the ancestors, what had he done to this boy? Harry stumbled around in a stupor, screaming in a voice that sounded like a mixture of his own and a deeper, somehow much more menacing voice, one that promised pain beyond pain, death beyond death for the unlucky fool that managed to rouse the enmity of its bearer.

Harry’s aura continued to extend outward from his body. The weapons of Grilthauk’s collection, forged of enchanted steel by some of the finest goblin smiths to ever walk the earth bent and shattered underneath the force of the boy’s pure magic. The very walls of Gringotts shook, cracks formed in the floors and ceilings. Grilthauk prayed to the ancestors with all of his being that it would be over soon, or else the structure of the building would collapse and kill him and Harry both, likely along with the entirety of the unified clans, and the destruction would not stop there. Those goblins that might manage to escape the building would be crushed by the aftershock. His clans would be wiped off the face of the planet, and it would be entirely his fault. How could he ever face the ancestors after that?

In a brief moment of humor, Grilthauk mused that the fools at the Ministry with their magical detectors were no doubt pissing themselves at the moment. He only hoped that Dolores Umbridge would have a coronary. Grilthauk would feel much better about dying given the knowledge that the walking blob of bigotry was going to the afterlife with him. He would at least have that trifling merit to offer

before the ancestors. Pray that they would show him enough mercy not to place him and Umbridge in the same Hell.

As the quaking reached a crescendo, and Harry's aura bathed the entire room with an emerald green glow, two laser-like beams of pure green light shot from the area between Harry's shoulders. A moment later, the boy's back exploded open, twin streams of blood and gore sprayed out behind Harry and bore a hole through Grilthauk's office door. Grilthauk watched as Harry's body snapped up to attention, and from the holes where the flesh of his back had been a moment before sprouted a pair of forest green wings that stretched to a full span of nearly eight feet before the goblin's eyes. At that moment, Harry Potter, no, whatever this boy now was, winged, glowing, and bathed in a shower blood and gore a color as black as Lord Voldemort's heart, looked the very definition of a fallen angel, before slumping into unconsciousness.

Grilthauk's war-hardened heart wept for this poor child upon whom the goblin chieftain's own negligence had forced this wretched condition. For a brief moment, he cursed his lord for having taken and sired a child by that dakaathi princess, a child whose grandson would have to suffer this fate. This only lasted a second, though, as the old goblin remembered his oath, and swore again that he would see his lord's plan to fruition. He would speak with this boy, this demon when he awoke. He would convince the boy of the correctness of his lord's cause, and he would serve the boy as he had served the boy's great-grandfather. Oh, Voldemort, the half-blood slave who had dared to usurp Grilthauk's lord's most sacred title, would suffer first, of that there could be no doubt. The boy would not forgive the crimes that Salazar Slytherin's bastard descendant had inflicted upon his mother and father. But then, oh yes, but then it would be Albus Dumbledore's turn to suffer. Indeed, the great Lord Grindelwald would be avenged. Avenged by his ill-fated blood heir. Soon after, without its champion, that corrupt hive of intolerance and bigotry that was British Ministry of Magic would crumble as well. Grilthauk could hardly wait for the battle to begin. It had been too long since the last great goblin war. Grilthauk fingered the sword sheathed at his waist, gnarled hands aching with bloodlust. The clans would fight as one once more, and he, Grilthauk the Greedy, would lead them in that glorious conflict.

Harry awoke some time later on a soft bed. Looking around, he found himself situated in what was easily the most luxurious room he had ever stayed in. Even the sheets on the bed he had apparently slept in had strands of pure gold woven into the silk. The floors were tiled with priceless magical jade. Jade...Harry looked down at his left hand. The ring still adorned his finger. So it wasn't just a dream, then? Looking a bit more to his left, Harry saw a steaming plate of roast beef and mashed potatoes, and a golden jeweled goblet filled to the brim with ice cold pumpkin juice. His stomach suddenly decided to remind him that he hadn't eaten since early that morning at the Dursleys'. Harry wasted no time in greedily wolfing down the meal in front of him. A sudden thought struck him, that maybe next time he might try the meat raw. He knew that he should have found the idea repulsive, only that it just wasn't. He felt nothing, aside from a small wave of both amusement and disgust at the insecurities that he had seemingly grown accustomed to having over the years of his short lifetime.

Dismissing the thought, he decided to wash up. Getting out of bed, Harry noticed a small collection of forest green feathers strewn about on the sheet where he had just been. A beautiful color, he thought, wondering where exactly where they came from as he began to walk over into the restroom to get a good look at himself in the mirror. Upon arriving, he took an involuntary step back at the reflection before. The most striking change was that he had sprouted wings. Fucking WINGS. How in Merlin's name had that come about? Well, it did answer his question about the origin of the feathers, at least. Harry had no problem with the new appendages, he thought as he flexed them. They were quite malleable and easy to control. He tried wrapping his newfound wings around his body like a sort of coat, hoping that he'd be able to conceal them in that manner under his cloak. It just wouldn't do for him to be out in public with wings sticking out of his robes. Harry smirked slightly as the wings wrapped around him with ease, coating the better part of his upper body with feathers.

The wings weren't the only change he noticed in the mirror. His hair was another remarkable difference from earlier in the day. What used to be a messy, untamed mop now flowed straight down to slightly below his shoulders, the tip of his hair just touching the base of his wings. There were enough wisps falling down the front that they concealed his scar quite nicely. His eye color had changed slightly,

from a vibrant emerald to the dull forest of his newfound feathery appendages, and he seemed to be able to see perfectly well without his glasses, which had apparently fallen off his face and gotten lost when he fell unconscious. He was a bit taller, not a gangly ape like Ron, but he could certainly lay claim to a sudden growth spurt. Harry's muscles seemed a bit toned also. He wasn't ripped, but he had a certain athletic look to him. He had no idea how these changes had come about, but he certainly couldn't complain. He summed it all up in one voiced thought.

"Merlin's beard, I look good."

A door opened in the room where Harry had just been asleep. Looking into the mirror, he saw Grilthauk coming into view in the reflection, with some sort of book in his gnarled hand. He was too busy ogling himself at the moment to be really angry at the old goblin, but decided anyway to show the armored cretin the consequences of raising his ire. Quick as a flash of light, he rushed the goblin chieftain, lifting him, armor and all into the air with all the natural ease of catching a Snitch, by the throat and slamming him hard into the wall. Grilthauk's small escort of armed goblins started forward to the defense of their chieftain, but a swift glare from Harry cowed them with ease. Attempting to adopt the soft, dangerous tone that he had heard so many times from his greasy Potions professor, Harry spoke to the writhing goblin.

"Now, President, tell me why I shouldn't rip out your windpipe and use it to floss my teeth?"

Nice one, Harry mused. Why couldn't he think of lines like that during all of those encounters with that suckling Malfoy? He might have to use it again when he returned to school. Only slightly aware that Grilthauk was suffocating, Harry waited for a reply, which came from the old goblin in a wheeze.

"Please, Harry. I can explain everything."

"Really, now? Then why haven't you done so yet."

"Release me, and I will tell you. Ancestors, have mercy, Harry."

“Oh, very well. Now start talking. You can begin by telling me what actually happened in your office. You see, I wasn’t really aware of things owing to the pain.”

“Yes, Harry, the pain you felt was your body adapting. Attempting to transform into its rightful form, the fruits of which you were just admiring in that mirror.”

Harry smiled coldly at the old goblin.

“Really? I seem to recall you tricking me into putting on this cursed ring, causing the pain to begin with, and then proceeding to worsen said pain with that poison concoction of yours. A potions master you are not, President.”

“No, Harry. You are only partially correct. Your body was attempting to transform, to evolve before you even came to London today, I would imagine. You see, the demonic blood that flows in your veins feeds off of your pain and your negative emotions. As the demonic influence is relatively demure within your bloodstream, or at least it was before your transformation, it was unable to muster enough strength from your thoughts and senses alone to initiate the transformation. You may have felt your body attempting to take that energy transform whenever you felt any particularly strong emotion, but it likely only manifested as a minor irritation. Hence the need for that ring. The stone in your ring is actually a crystallized sample of your maternal great-grandmother’s blood. She was a full-blooded dakaath of royal stock, whereas you, Harry, are a hybrid formed of the coupling of a dakaath and a human. Her blood coming into contact with your flesh provided the activation energy needed to begin your transformation. Normally, the process would involve nearly a month of pain such as that you experienced. That potion increased the transformation speed exponentially, and so the requisite pain was also drastically increased for the brief amount of time needed for the entire process to take place. You should be thanking me for letting you simply get it over with.”

Harry looked positively indignant, but only for a moment.

“Demons? I ask you for an explanation, President, and you give me a fairy tale. There are no such things as demons, and I have no idea whatever in the Hell a “dakaath” is supposed to be.”

“Had someone come to you ten years ago, Harry, and told you that magic was real, or that ghosts and giants really existed, would you have believed them then?”

Harry didn't need any clarification to understand the chieftain's point.

“All right, Grilthauk, I'll take you at your word for now. Assuming these demons exist, how exactly did I come to possess their blood? And what is a dakaath?”

Grilthauk sighed inwardly, at least this was going better than expected. Keeping the Ministry Aurors out of the bank after the magical explosion resulting from Harry's transformation was a nightmare, and getting rid of that meddling codger Dumbledore was even more difficult. That old fool seemed to be of the opinion that it was his given right to stick his crooked nose into each and every odd occurrence that took place in wizarding Britain. Gringotts Wizard Bank fell outside of the dominion of the Ministry of Magic, and Dumbledore was nothing more than the headmaster of a damned school in terms of actual authority ever since his recent falling out with Cornelius Fudge, but both parties seemed more than happy to try to investigate and interfere with bank business at will. Thankfully, they left of their own volition, and Grilthauk didn't need to resort to attempting to expel them by force. There would be time enough for bloodshed later. Catching himself, Grilthauk decided that he had better answer Harry's questions before the newly transformed dakaath lost his patience.

“A dakaath could perhaps be best described in terms of their being a sort of demonic counterpart to the race of creatures known in this world as veela. Like the veela, the dakaath exert certain nearly irresistible auras that attract the attentions of those of the opposite sex. These symptoms may have only manifested within you very recently, as the demonic blood within you seemingly required an incubation period of nearly sixteen years before its effects started to show. An odd, but lucky coincidence that Lord Black's will found me

right as your blood gifts began to manifest. Forewarned is forearmed, as the muggles say.”

Harry thought the situation was decidedly unlucky. Why couldn't this charm have come out while he was dating Cho ever so briefly last year? It would have saved him a lot of guff. He then recalled the episode with the saleswitch in Madame Malkin's earlier in the day. Perhaps he had been a bit harsh with her, not that he really cared. But if he was a dakaath, a demon, why did he attract a human girl? Not that he had even transformed at that point, which brought up another sticking point: if his so-called “dakaathi charm” was powerful enough to get that pretty twenty-something to practically drool over him while in his human state, what could he expect now that he was the real thing? Returning to Hogwarts with its small army of hormonal teenage witches was starting to seem like a less than practical idea, though Harry still found it irresistible for some reason or another.

“However, the dakaath bear some striking differences from the veela as well. Veela transform into an avian state only when angered, and thus shift between a completely human appearance and a completely avian appearance. On the other hand, the dakaath have an appearance somewhere between that of a human and a bird, one that they always assume. Your appearance is furthermore somewhere between that of a dakaath and a human. You bear wings, but lack the talons that a full-blooded dakaath would possess. Further, the veela are known for their fiery, violent dispositions. Dakaath are the exact opposite. Their feelings and emotions are rather lacking compared to those of humans, much less veela. This is due to the fact that the dakaath maintain and replenish their magical reserves by feeding from their emotional capacities rather than their physical capacities, so that they actually have much less that they can actively express. Also, the lessened emotional capacity within a dakaath's brain allows for an increased mental capacity, or in more common terms, enhanced intelligence, at least relative to a human. There is one glaring exception to this emotional repression: desire, in some instances better known as lust, the hormonal drive for which is drastically higher within the dakaath. To compensate, and to supplement this self-serving, desirous nature, dakaath are nearly completely bereft of any capacity for such feelings as compassion, shame and guilt.”

Harry was almost offended by that last remark, but brushed it off rather easily. He did venture a question, curiosity getting the better of him. Odd, seeing as he apparently wasn't supposed to be feeling such emotions very strongly, if he understood the old goblin correctly.

"Since my body is apparently drawing less from my physical reserves now that I've transformed, does that mean I should expect to have more strength and stamina? And I still feel certain emotions, even though I apparently shouldn't be. Explain?"

Grilthauk paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, and then attempted to answer.

"As for your first question, I would imagine so, at least on some level. However, the increased physical capacities of the dakaath tend to manifest themselves through two primary avenues. First, the dakaath possess an extremely high instinctual capacity for bloodlust and physical course, you can probably guess the second outlet, and that would be sexual promiscuity. Dakaath are very sexually active. They are driven creatures, Harry. Their thirst for blood and sex, for the constant appeasement of their most basic physical desires, also leads them to have a certain taste for battle. They sate their instinctual bloodlust on the battlefield, and take the women of their rivals as spoils of war. They are also quite vain and proud, though you wouldn't see it by looking. The dakaath enjoy proving their superiority over other races, other tribes of the demon realms, and they are quite universally hated for it. Truly, despite their typically bored and repressed emotional dispositions and high levels of intelligence, the dakaath are oftentimes quite barbaric."

Harry decided that was quite enough of that line of questioning. He really didn't need a wrinkled goblin talking to him about sex any more than absolutely necessary.

"And my second question? Why do I still feel that which I apparently should not, and why am I not particularly feeling any extreme bloodlust and sexual desire at the moment?"

“Well, even a full dakaath will still experience the full range of emotions on varying levels, and not even a full dakaath is gripped by reckless desire all of the time. I never said otherwise. A dakaath’s emotional responses are simply milder, easier to repress than those of most other creatures. As for you, you still possess some human blood. You are an unknown entity, Harry. I cannot tell for certain whether or not your dakaathi blood will affect you as completely as it would a full-fledged demon, or if your mannerisms will fall somewhere between those of a dakaath and a human.”

Harry smiled dryly.

“So, I’ll more or less have to learn as I go, right? It doesn’t matter, really. I’ll just act in whatever manner comes naturally to me. Is there anything else that I should know about this race that I supposedly now belong to?”

Grilthauk smirked back at Harry.

“Yes, the dakaath are a demonic species. Further, they, like you, have magical cores as well as the intellectual capacity for abstract thought. As such, they have their own sort of magic, one very different from ours.”

“And that is?”

“The ability to manipulate the forces of chaos, the very negative energy that exists as a counterpart, a balancing mechanism, to the forces of nature and order that human wizards draw upon. The very essence of death and destruction, as it were. Avada Kedavra is a curse that draws upon the minute amount of chaotic energy that exists within the humans’ collective magical reservoir. As you have seen, even that little amount of negative energy is enough to fell a human being with ease. You see, Harry, humans have little to no resistance to chaotic energy, whereas demons are equally susceptible to ordered energy. If the two realms were ever to go to war, the natural result would be the near obliteration of both.”

Harry thought about this, and quickly understood how these concepts might be applied to him. Dakaathi intelligence, indeed.

“So, I am part human and part dakaath, and so my energy is part ordered and part chaotic. This means that I ought to have a certain level of ability to manipulate both, and a certain level of resistance to both, as one form of energy seems to cancel out the other. Do you think that my dakaathi blood and my inherent chaotic energy are the real reason why I survived Avada Kedavra as a baby? Dumbledore told me that it was my mother’s sacrifice that protected me.”

Grilthauk’s smile broadened.

“I cannot say for sure, Harry, but if I were to venture an educated guess, I would agree with you on all of your points, particularly on the last. The dakaathi blood and chaotic core were within you from your birth, even if they were not yet active when Lord Voldemort attacked your home that tragic night. The chaotic potential within you could possibly have shielded you from harm, even though you could not knowingly tap it, a concept similar to the normal child wizard phenomenon of accidental magic. As for Albus Dumbledore, perhaps he was simply ignorant of your heritage and reasoned the most viable explanation for the phenomenon available to him, or maybe he simply lied. The old bastard is far too slippery for the likes of us mere mortals to discern his motives for certain.”

Harry decided that Grilthauk obviously had some level of hostility towards Dumbledore. Filing that thought away for later, he had to wonder himself whether or not the Headmaster had knowingly kept the truth of Harry’s heritage from him. He still had questions that needed answering for now, but he was most curious as to how Grilthauk knew all of this. He hardly imagined that researching demonic veela was a normal activity for a bank president. He could try his hand at playing Slytherin and attempt to get the goblin to spill through veiled questions, but Grilthauk was obviously half terrified of Harry, so the latter saw no reason for pretense.

“Grilthauk, I have one more question. How are you so knowledgeable about the dakaath?”

Grilthauk, expecting this question sooner or later, handed Harry the book he had brought into the room with him. Harry glanced at the title

– A Treatise on Demonology: Arcane Races, Chaotic Force, and Summoning Rites. On the bottom of the cover was the name of the author. Alphonse Evans. Evans...his mother's maiden name. Surely this wasn't just a coincidence, Grilthauk had handed him the book without a single word. This Alphonse Evans must have been an ancestor of Harry's, and he had a feeling that Grilthauk knew the whole story. Harry continued to look at the book's cover as the goblin spoke once more.

"Come, Harry. Take a walk with me. There is still much for you to see, and much for us to discuss."

With that, Grilthauk left the room. Harry followed, a brief sojourn during which Harry the truth of his mother's heritage, the truth that Lily Evans-Potter herself never knew, and armed with that truth, Harry's former path would close to him, and a new one would open in its place.

(End Chapter Two)

Author's Note: Well, that's the second chapter finished. I know that I left some questions unanswered, for example why Lily never exhibited any dakaathi traits, despite obviously carrying the demonic blood, as she passed it down to Harry. I will attempt to answer this question and others in the next chapter, but if there's anything that particularly confuses any of you, please let me know in a review, so that I can attempt to clarify for you. I know that Grilthauk seems to know far much more than he should, but I will get to why exactly that is. Thanks to my reviewers, and constructive criticism is always welcome and encouraged.

“Come, Harry. Take a walk with me. There is still much for you to see, and much for us to discuss.”

With that, Grilthauk left the room. Harry followed, a brief sojourn during which Harry the truth of his mother’s heritage, the truth that Lily Evans-Potter herself never knew, and armed with that truth, Harry’s former path would close to him, and a new one would open in its place.

Chapter Three: Bloodlines – What He Shall Become

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry followed Grilthauk down a winding corridor; the goblin walking briskly and the still-injured Harry struggling to keep up, becoming increasingly annoyed with each painful passing step. A week ago, he’d probably have been yelling at the old President of Gringotts by this point, but now his face betrayed only a slight scowl, perhaps a direct consequence of the inborn emotional repressors from his now active dakaathi blood, though Harry wouldn’t even have noticed. It seemed only natural to him. Grilthauk took a sudden right turn, nearly causing Harry to stumble as he adjusted his path to follow. A jolt of pain shot through his legs with the sudden jerking movement. This was getting ridiculous, Harry thought.

“Goblin, you're leading me to nowhere. We were supposed to be sitting down to talk.”

Grilthauk turned back to the young part-dakaath.

“I have not forgotten. We will speak more when we reach your ancestral vault. There are things you need to see. I know that you are still injured. I have instructed one of the goblins to have a pain-reducing potion ready in my office. We will have to pass through there on the way. The only entrance to your family’s vault is via direct passage from my personal chambers.”

“I’m quite positive it’ll work just as well as the last pain reliever you offered me. Besides that, what you say is nonsense. Griphook

escorted me to my family vault a month before my first year at Hogwarts, and I've been there several times since."

Grilthauk flashed Harry a small grin of approval.

"I am pleased that you still remember his name, young Harry. Not many humans would have enough sense to consider a goblin's name worth so much as a second thought. Yes, I believe that we can expect great leadership from you. We will not be visiting the Potter family fault, at least today. Now please, right this way. We are almost there."

Harry had no idea what to make of that, none whatsoever. Grilthauk was the goblin chieftain, so the idea of Harry leading the creatures was ridiculous. He was curious as to where the old goblin was leading him, if not to the Potter vault. Surely not the Black vault, the will hadn't even been read yet. That could only mean...but his mum was Muggleborn. True, Grilthauk had implied otherwise earlier in his office, but Harry had thought that the treacherous cretin was just fabricating some kind of explanation in order to trick him into putting on that accursed ring. Grilthauk was getting too far ahead, though, and Harry had to abandon his thoughts to catch up.

Presently, the pair reached a set of slightly scorched double doors, the gold plating melted in several places. Harry noticed a pair of holes on one of the doors, almost as if it'd been eaten through by acid, watching as Grilthauk ran a finger across the other, causing them both to creak open. His office, Harry realized as he followed the old goblin in. The room was in absolute ruin. Grilthauk's weapons were scattered about the floor bent and broken; his flags and pennants reduced to ashes. Even the desk was nearly in cinders. He obviously had truly done that much damage during his initial transformation. And yet Grilthauk weathered the magical storm unharmed. It must have had something to do with his armor, maybe the stuff was enchanted.

"Your potion is on the desk, Harry. And please, do not concern yourself with the office. It was due for a remodel anyway."

“How very generous of you. Realize, goblin, that I fully intend to rip out your intestinal tract and use it as toilet paper if this potion does anything to me other than numb the pain.”

Harry downed the potion in one swallow. This time, it actually did relieve Harry’s pain. He nodded to Grilthauk.

“Alright, then. Let’s continue on. Let’s see the entrance to this supposed vault.”

“Of course. Follow me, Harry.”

Grilthauk walked over his desk and prodded a small switch on the underside. With a low rumble, a long rectangular strip of the floor separated and opened, revealing a secret passageway leading underneath. Grilthauk started down the passage, motioning for Harry to follow. It was so dark and dingy that Harry had difficulty seeing in front of him, but he didn’t dare cast a Lumos or anything similar, having no desire to bring the Ministry down upon him again. It wasn’t that he was afraid of Fudge and his cronies, but it was just too much of a hassle. Presently, the passage led to an enormous cavern, roughly the size of the entirety of Hogwarts Castle. It was surprisingly well brightened. Grilthauk turned back to Harry.

“The torches in here have been charmed to always remain lit. Your great-grandfather was a truly powerful wizard, Harry. Not a single human soul, living or dead, has been down in this chamber for over half a century.”

The word “chamber” reminded Harry of the Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts. It, too, had been deserted for half a century, before being opened during Harry’s second year. He wondered if this chamber also had some great monster guarding it against unwelcome visitors. He decided to ask.

“Grilthauk, there had better now be any monsters down here.”

The goblin chieftain smiled nastily at Harry, before pointing to his right. Harry looked in the indicated direction, and was not at all happy with what he saw. A dragon, and not one of the regular garden-variety dragons like the ones from the Triwizard Tournament. This dragon

was well over twice the size of that Hungarian Horntail. It was a pure jet-black, looked to have a wingspan of at least a hundred feet, and had three heads. Hagrid would have gladly sold his soul to Voldemort just to be able to have a look at this thing, Harry mused. Thankfully, it seemed to be fast asleep.

“That thing is enormous, goblin. I’m in no condition to fight, and even I can tell when an enemy is better avoided.”

“A Nidhogg, Harry. This beast has been guarding the Evans family treasury since the day Gringotts was built. It is older than the Four Founders of Hogwarts, and would have proven a difficult adversary for any of them. It is the only creature of its kind left, and has been in a magically-induced state of hibernation, ever since the last acknowledged lord of the Evans line passed from this world over fifty years ago and this chamber was sealed. Once you break that seal on the vault with your magical signature, Harry, it will awaken and resume its duties once more. It is time, young one. Follow me to this door, and open the path to your destiny.”

Evans...so, this was about his mother’s family. His mother was descended from a pureblooded line after all. That would mean that Aunt Petunia bore magical blood as well. Oh dear, that old horse-faced bitch would be absolutely mortified, not to mention what the walrus would think. Harry made a mental note to owl his Muggle relatives with the joyful news as soon as he was able. But that last statement of Grilthauk’s...Harry’s destiny. He didn’t like that at all. He didn’t want to be bound by something as ridiculous as some destiny. He already had enough to deal with, that ridiculous Prophecy made by that old bawd Trelawney. Even so, Harry wanted to see what awaited him beyond this last sealed door. He walked cautiously over to Grilthauk’s location and stopped before a large runic door fashioned of a strange metallic blue material, the likes of which he had never seen before. Grilthauk drew the sword from his waist and handed it to Harry, who took it with a slight bit of hesitation.

“Make a small incision on the palm of your right hand and smear the blood on the door, Harry.”

Harry did so, marveling at how easily the blade cut through. He decided that he certainly wouldn't want to be on the business end of a slash from this particular weapon. When Harry touched his bloodied hand against the door, it began to glow with a strange light. A loud growling sound from behind startled Harry, though he didn't flinch. Apparently the Nidhogg was awake. The vault door, seal broken, slid open, and Harry stalked in, wondering what riches might await him, Grilthauk following close behind.

If a large pile of gold, silver and bronze is what Harry was expecting, he was greatly mistaken. This room wasn't just a vault. It was an entire underground complex, fit for human habitation if need be. It was equipped with a fully stocked potions lab, including some ingredients that could no longer be found in this world. Not that Harry would have known that, but Severus Snape would likely have had a mild orgasm on the spot. There was a large training chamber, both for physical and magical combat, equipped with a formal dueling strip and training dummies. The complex's library contained several rare and priceless tomes, including one on ancient light arts written by Merlin, himself. There was even a large dining hall capable of accommodating several hundred people. And then there were the treasure vaults. The largest contained the Evans family's actual physical assets, spilling with enough gold galleons to make the Malfoys look only moderately wealthy by comparison. Combining the Evans fortune with what Harry would soon inherit from the Potter and Black vaults, Harry could buy the majority of Britain and have enough gold left over to swim in. Harry briefly considered building an overlarge money bin to stock his gold, like in that muggle cartoon about the old duck with the Scottish accent. No, he decided, that would be entirely too ridiculous.

"Well, I guess I won't have to worry about money ever again. You know, I think it's about time I started enjoying my money, and to Hell with what Dumbledore and the rest will think of it."

Grilthauk chuckled lightly.

"Come on, Harry. There are still a few rooms that I would like to show you, and then we can sit down and have that talk."

Harry followed, finally completely free of the pain of his transformation earlier in the day. The next room was filled with what seemed to be pure ore, of that same material that the door to the vault was comprised of. He walked over to a well-sized boulder and ran his hands over the material. It was smooth, but seemed almost indestructible. Harry smirked slightly, and swung Grilthauk's blade, a weapon of incomparable sharpness forged of ancient enchanted ingot iron by a legendary goblin blacksmith and inscribed with battle runes to enhance sharpness and durability besides, with the full extent of his newfound dakaathi strength. Sword met stone in a shower of sparks, and not a single scratch or crack was made to either. Harry looked a bit disappointed.

"Well, that wasn't what I was expecting. Your sword is too dull, Grilthauk."

"No, Harry. If you searched the world over you'd find no blade sharper than mine. However, that material is arkanite ore, a rare mineral found only in the deepest mines of Russia very near the planet's core, where muggle technology cannot even hope to reach. It is considered to be completely impenetrable, both by physical and magical means. Arkanite is priceless, and any blacksmith would consider it a great honor to be trusted to work with it."

"If it's so priceless, explain to me why there is so much of it here."

"Your great-grandfather, once again After many years of research, he and Nicholas Flamel colleague in discovering the alchemical formula. This was long before the latter's work with Dumbledore in the creation of the Sorcerer's Stone. However, that formula requires a special grade of blood ruby, itself extremely rare in this realm and impossible to produce through magical means. It is fairly common in the demon realm, however. The dakaath happen to use it as a form of currency when trading with other demonic tribes, though they tend to trade with women within their own borders. The stockpile you see here is the result of three years of alchemical work."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. Trading with women. How very kinky. But something else bothered him...

"You seem to know quite a bit. And you've spoken of this great-grandfather of mine before. Tell me who he was. I want answers, goblin."

"And you shall have them, Harry. Do not be impatient. There are two rooms left for you to see."

Harry nodded and followed Grilthauk to the adjoining room, which was filled with...eggs. Hundreds, maybe thousands of eggs, of all shapes and colors and sizes. This particular room seemed to have a powerful cooling charm built in.

"This, Harry, is the Evans family's magical creature collection. Through selective breeding over many generations, the family has managed to procure a male and a female representative of nearly every species, and indeed, subspecies, within the magical world. They have been trapped in their smallest infant forms, placed into magically induced comas, and placed within these eggs. They can only be awakened by a direct descendent of the Evans line, and are magically bonded to that person upon hatching."

All of these creatures, trapped in captivity for Merlin knows how long, Harry mused. Hermione would go absolutely ballistic, and so would Hagrid. For vastly differing reasons, of course. Grilthauk, with a strange glint in his eye, walked towards the final room, which was protected by yet another arkanite door. This one, though, only had a small notch in the very center.

"Press your legacy ring into the notch, Harry."

Harry complied, a bit skeptical, but the ring fit perfectly. Upon contact with the ring, the door flashed a greenish color and then slid open. What greeted Harry beyond was a structure that would later change the fate of the entire world, to the extent of its near destruction. A gigantic archway made of a strange black metal, engraved on nearly every available bit of its surfaces by runic symbols, of a language the likes of which Harry had never seen and could not even begin to fathom. Ten or fifteen people standing side-by-side could fit through with relative ease. Harry didn't know what it was, but he ventured a guess.

“...It’s a portal to the demon realm.”

Grilthauk fixed him with a saccharine smile that looked horribly out of place on his wrinkled goblin face.

“Yes, Harry. This portal is your great-grandfather’s greatest work, the culmination of all his later life’s research. Nearly sixty years of time and effort went in to building and structure and researching all of the runic patterns. The language is that of the fallen seraphii, the first demons, believed to have been cast out from the realm of the afterworld, the sacred ground upon which no mortal man may ever tread. They are the direct ancestors of the dakaath, and that very fact is the reason that the tribe whose blood flows in your veins believe themselves to be the rightful rulers of the entirety of the demon realm. Even with your great-grandmother’s help, herself a dakaathi royal princess fully trained in the ancient demonic languages, along with an entire team of dakaathi sages and artificers, it took your great-grandfather, genius though he was, countless days of time and energy to complete it.”

Harry was impressed. There was simply no alternative but to be.

“Incredible. So, lets hear how it works. How one opens it, as it were..”

“There is an ancient summoning ritual that allows one to bring forth and command the energies of all three realms: ordered energy from the realm of humans, chaotic energy from the realm of demons, and divine energy from the realm of the afterworld. If these three elements are combined in equal proportion, it is possible to open a portal from this realm to another. However, the sheer amount of power required for opening a portal of this magnitude...the overall magical force would have to significantly exceed that of Merlin at his absolute maximum strength. Even the current powers of Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort combined would likely be insufficient.”

Right, that was a lot of power. Not that Harry really had any desire to visit the demon realm to begin with. He was only curious.

"I believe you owe me that story now, Grilthauk. We'll sit in the library."

"Of course, Harry. It is time you learned of your destiny."

There he went with that destiny stuff again. Harry was growing quite bored of it. The pair sat down in a couple of armchairs in the compound's library.

"All right, I'm listening."

"Very well, Harry. I shall now tell you the story of your great-grandfather. Nearly two hundred years ago, a wizard of great power and unsurpassed genius graduated from Hogwarts. He was a proud Ravenclaw, the very best of his class in every subject he desired to study. His name was Alphonse Evans. Similar to the way you have today, Alphonse came to the lordship of his family at the young age of nineteen. His parents made the fatal mistake of using a simple levitation spell a bit too near a group of Muggles, religious fanatics, while taking a holiday somewhere in South America. They were caught unaware by a rather large mob, tied up, and executed for heresy and witchcraft."

His parents were murdered as well, then. Must run in the family, Harry thought dryly.

"Unable to cope and too logical to simply turn to blind hate for all muggles, Alphonse buried himself in his research. Indeed, he thirsted to unravel the most intricate mysteries of the magical world. With the prestige and resources of the Evans family, the most far-reaching in wizarding Britain, perhaps in the entire European continent, it seemed nothing was out of his grasp. He took a strong interest in alchemy for a good while, working alongside the great master Nicholas Flamel in developing the formula for arkanite, among other accomplishments..."

The old goblin paused for a moment.

"...Now one day Alphonse made a trip down to the Evans family compound here at Gringotts, mostly to make a withdrawal to fund his research, but decided to scour the library for any interesting alchemical tomes at the same time. What he found instead was a

book of ancient summoning rituals dating back from the time of Merlin, the very beginnings of your secluded world. It took him nearly a year to decipher the language, even with references to help, but when he did. he came across a spell. One nearly impossible to work, but with truly revolutionary possibilities.”

Harry spoke up for the first time since Grilthauk had begun his story.

“The portal spell.”

“Yes, Harry. Alphonse became obsessed with the idea of doing what no human wizard had ever done before. He wished to travel to the demon realm, spoken of only in legend. He wished to learn of their people and customs, and to bring that knowledge back to the human realm. However, he could not work the spell alone. He recruited the assistance of a rising magical prodigy, a young wizard with raw power the likes of which the wizarding world had not seen since the days of legend, to assist him in opening a portal large enough for Alphonse to take into the demon realm.”

“...Dumbledore.”

“Yes, your great-grandfather and Dumbledore worked the spell together, and with their combined magical power, they succeeded in creating a portal large enough for Alphonse. Alphonse came out on the middle Karal'taleth, the capital city of the dakaathi civilization. Thankfully, the translation charm from the human realm still worked in the demon realm, the latter's magical reservoir containing just enough ordered energy to work the spell, and so Alphonse was able to communicate with this unknown race. The dakaath, having never seen a visitor from another realm, treated him exceedingly well, and he stayed in the royal palace and dined at the same table as the king and queen. Dakaathi soldiers and scholars accompanied Alphonse on his travels throughout the realm, as your great-grandfather wrote volumes on the different species, and on the nature of demonic magic. He was given the highest honor of the winged demonic race, a princess of the royal family to take as his own. He loved the place, Harry, so much that he was reluctant to leave, and he didn't. It is here that Alphonse did his work on the stones of his portal, in hopes that

one day, travel between the two realms would be possible for all. He remained within the dakaathi kingdom for several decades...”

Grilthauk paused to catch his breath once more.

“...During his stay, the demon realm was gripped by a terrible catastrophe. A minor god, expelled from the realm of the afterworld, like the dakaath’s ancestors had been centuries before, made his way to the demon realm. His name was Zharrghast, and he intended to make the entire realm into his personal empire, with which to raise a great army of demonic soldiers in order to attempt an invasion upon the realm of the afterworld. Of course, the demons, dakaath included, resisted. It was in vain. Zharrghast wielded a sword of cataclysmic power; a weapon forged of the combined energies of all the three realms, ordered, chaotic, and divine, coalesced into physical form and imbued into a blade of dark matter. He christened the weapon the Demarr Devil Blade. With it he could challenge even the elder gods themselves, to say nothing of mere mortals. Zharrghast slaughtered all that opposed him. In a last and desperate effort, the dakaath begged Alphonse, whose wisdom and power was famed throughout the realm, to challenge the corrupted deity at a special place within the demon realm. This place was the very point at which all three realms, all three planes of existence, intersected, a battlefield at which all three magical energies could be wielded with equal effectiveness...”

Another pause.

“..Alphonse, though hopelessly outmatched in terms of pure power, accepted. He could not turn a blind eye to the sufferings of those who had shown him such kindness. He battled against Zharrghast, fighting completely defensively, for nearly three full days. In this way, he broke the god’s patience, and Zharrghast made a critical error. He used the Demaar Devil Blade’s full potential, creating a great nexus leading into the abyss of the demonic underworld, a place from which no living being could escape. He then fired a pulse of pure chaotic energy from the Demarr Devil Blade at Alphonse, hoping to either obliterate him outright or cast him into the abyss. Alphonse dodged, and used a powerful ordered banishing curse to send Zharrghast’s attack into the nexus, where the negative energies of the abyss

increased its magnitude a hundred fold and spat it back out. The empowered wave naturally sought out the greatest source of pure energy in the realm - Zharrghast. Crushed by his own rebounded attack, the fallen god was seriously wounded. Alphonse then summoned the Demaar Devil Blade away from Zharrghast, and then banished him through his own nexus, finally exerting all of his energies to close the hole, trapping his enemy inside for all eternity."

Harry just listened, too absorbed to say a word. He wondered momentarily if this ancestor of his was truly so noble, or if Grilthauk was embellishing the tale for some reason or another. Harry decided that he wouldn't have exerted himself so needlessly, fully aware of the fact that he had done just that for the last five years. Brave Harry Potter, the shining, Gryffindor hero. Looking back at it all was nearly enough to make him nauseous. Grilthauk continued his tale.

"And so, Alphonse triumphed. He had exerted his all, drained his magical reserves down to the very fiber of his being. He was grievously injured and would never fully recover from the battle. The dakaath hailed Alphonse as a hero, as the savior of the entire demon realm. In this way, he became a sort of demonic parallel to you yourself. He was presented with Zharrghast's cursed brand, the Demarr Devil Blade, as a proof of his victory. However, Alphonse knew that his time remaining in the realm of the living was short. He petitioned to return home in order to share the fruits of his years of research within the demon realm with his own people, and to see to the continuation of his family line..."

Harry did not want to think about a man that old having sexual relations, and tried his best to force the image from his mind.

"..Through the use of an old fertility spell, as Alphonse was nearly a hundred and thirty years old at this point, his wife, the dakaathi princess Khariana, carried his only child to term while her husband's physical injuries healed. Ironically, Michael Evans was born a Squib despite the powerful magical bloodlines of both of his parents. There was no time for a second attempt, though, and Alphonse again petitioned the dakaathi royal family to send sages with him to the place where he and Zharrghast had battled, the place where the energy of all three realms was gathered in abundance, to create a

portal to send him home. His wife could not accompany him, as she was the only child of the dakaathi royal family and thus the future queen. She gave him the ring that you wear on your finger today as a promise that her heart and soul, her very essence, would always be his. And so, Alphonse, along with his newborn son, the Demarr Devil Blade, his many volumes of research, several tons of the blood ruby needed to create pure arkanite, and the three engraved slabs that would constitute his great portal, were sent back to the human realm...”

Harry looked down at the ring on his finger, Khariana’s promise, with a faint hint of pride.

“...However, times had changed in the magic world during the seventy years that Alphonse had spent in the demon realm. The Ministry of Magic had grown incorrigibly corrupt, and the great conflict that the muggles refer to today as the Great War, as well as Britain’s recent entry into a second such conflict, had filled the hearts and minds of all people, Muggle and wizard alike, with fear and insecurity. And so when Alphonse returned home bearing an ominous weapon and countless books on demons and chaotic magic, he was quickly condemned as a dark wizard and persecuted. Saddened and enraged at this mindless betrayal, but unwilling to stain his family’s name with the stigma of having spawned a dark lord, Alphonse Evans assumed the name of Lord Grindelwald, the name by which history would remember him. He falsely claimed to be an agent of Nazi Germany, a personal confidant of Adolf Hitler, sent to purge wizarding Britain of impurities.”

Lord Grindelwald. The dark wizard that Dumbledore had fought against in the 1940’s was Harry’s great-grandfather. Perhaps Dumbledore also knew about this. Harry smirked inwardly, wondering what the wizarding public would think of this little piece of information, to say nothing of the likes of Hermione and the Weasleys. Hermione might have enough sense to remain loyal to him, but Harry still had his doubts. But the Weasleys would turn against him in half a heartbeat, as deep as their prejudices ran. Not that it was really important, Harry decided. Grindelwald was smart enough to keep the Evans name clean, so nobody could possibly connect any of it to Harry save for the Headmaster, and the old man would keep his

mouth shut. After all, Dumbledore had a reputation for keeping vital information to himself.

“Lord Grindelwald. That’s a rather interesting piece of information. Please, continue.”

“Yes, well, the backlash against Grindelwald was enormous. Purebloods and Muggleborns alike united against this seemingly foreign invader, the mighty archmage Albus Dumbledore at the helm. Grindelwald clandestinely approached those with similar discontent towards the Ministry and their heavy-handed policies and bigotry. Many non-humans, the goblin clans included, saw Grindelwald as a beacon of hope, a champion sent from another world to free them from the corrupt and oppressive Ministry government. I was not yet chieftain then, and the then-chieftain appointed me as the general of the goblin forces pledged to Grindelwald’s aid. Harry, I made a personal oath of loyalty to your great-grandfather those many years ago, and oath that I have never forgotten. Grindelwald also sought help from abroad, spending freely from the Evans family treasury in order to hire mercenary troops. As a matter of fact, an elite group of Shinn Kohaku assassins, magical assassins known within the Muggle world as “ninja,” formed Grindelwald’s personal guard.”

Ninja...This tale just kept getting more and more complicated, Harry thought with a mixture of repressed annoyance and amazement.

“We fought with all that we had, but we never stood much of a chance. We won our share of battles but the united resistance of the frenzied wizards and witches, not to mention Dumbledore, who was then at the very peak of his power whereas Grindelwald was old and ailing, was too much for us to even hope to overcome. The war was lost in the course of a few short years. The night before Grindelwald’s final battle with Dumbledore, the one that he knew then would cost him his life; your great-grandfather summoned me to his chambers, and told me the entirety of this story that I repeat to you now. He entreated me to hide his son within the muggle world, away from Dumbledore and the Ministry, and to wait for the day that a descendent of his line would rise up, a special child capable of wielding the dakaathi powers that Khariana had passed on to their son. This child would have the power to wield the legendary Demarr Devil Blade, the charisma to

unite the loyal and righteous against the wizarding world's injustices, and the skill and intellect to use those people properly. It is my belief now that the time of his final wish has come. I have spent fifty long years poring over your great-grandfather's research, learning all that he had to share with our world, so that I would be prepared to advise and give my utmost for when the time came, for this day. You are that child, Harry. Khariana's ring has already recognized you as the chosen one. You are the one that must take up the sword and lead us to the victory that your great-grandfather perished in the pursuit of."

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. By now, he was used to being held to impossible standards, to being expected to bear the entire world's burden. But this was absolutely preposterous. Grilthauk couldn't truly expect Harry to be equal to the legacy of a man that challenged a bloody fucking god and emerged victorious. He couldn't even properly curse Bellatrix a week before, couldn't even overcome a small group of incompetents led by a single reasonably skilled dark wizard. Harry was a bit flattered by the goblin's regard, but knew that it was impossible for him to be correct.

"No Grilthauk, you're mistaken. I'm not equal to Grindelwald's deeds, or his legacy. You'll have to wait a while longer."

"Harry, it is you who is mistaken. You have already thwarted the false Lord Voldemort, whose fascist ideals and terrorist methods are a blatant disgrace to those of his noble predecessor, the dark lord that had risen before him. You have already faced the persecution of the corrupt Ministry, and have already suffered loss at the hands of Albus Dumbledore's twisted machinations. You have been both a great hero and a wrongly reviled scapegoat. This is your destiny, Harry. You know in your heart that I speak the truth."

Destiny...Harry was getting tired of hearing that word. Voldemort, yes, he would give his utmost to destroy the serpent-faced bastard, he had decided that long ago. And the Ministry of Magic...Harry agreed that the institution was corrupt, and would perhaps be better done away with, but wasn't convinced that he was really capable of doing it any more than that he was willing to shoulder the burden of replacing it and governing a fickle and treacherous wizarding public. And then there was Dumbledore. Harry wasn't happy with the old man, but he didn't want to kill him either. A small part of Harry, smaller than he

even realized, still wanted to simply prove a point by his escape from Privet Drive, and then go back to the way things were. To look to Dumbledore as a surrogate grandfather, to play Quidditch with the Weasleys, to be lectured by Hermione, to pine after Cho Chang, to simply tell this old goblin to stuff it and return to his old life.

But the rest of him knew that he couldn't do that, and that he didn't even want to. That resounding voice completely squelched the small remaining whisper of dissent within his heart. Harry now understood, when he placed Khariana's ring onto his finger, his previous life was burned to ashes and scattered off into the four winds upon wings of forest. Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, lived no longer. In his place stood Harry Alphonse Evans, slayer of countless men and lover of countless women. Scourge to all that would oppose him and the most feared and respected wizard to ever walk the earth. Indeed, deep in his heart, Harry knew Grilthauk's words to be true. His fate was to take up the burden of continuing Lord Grindelwald's legacy, and he would embrace it. He would take up the blade that his ancestor had stared down a fallen god to claim and use it to burn away the iniquities of the world that had so often betrayed him and wreak his own special brand of vengeance upon those who had wronged him. Should that entail facing down his closest friends or his surrogate family on the field of battle when the time came and spilling their blood, then Harry was completely ready and willing to do so. There was nothing more to ponder. The answer was as clear to him as the sun in the sky.

"I understand. Yes, I'll do it. I'll lead you into battle."

Grilthauk was all smiles.

"I knew you would, Harry. I knew from the very moment that I laid eyes upon you. Now, it is time for you to claim the last remaining part of your birthright, to remove the Demarr Devil Blade from its place of rest."

"Speaking of which, I don't see the thing anywhere. I would imagine that it'd be down here somewhere."

“No, Harry. The Demarr Devil Blade rests in a special place at the rear of Gringotts, sealed by some of the oldest and most powerful magic in existence. At that place, your great-grandfather’s most loyal retainers, his personal guard, along with their descendants, protect the legendary brand. They, like I, have long awaited your ascendancy. Just as I pledge now that the full might of the unified clans will be behind you in your glorious struggle, they too shall serve, as they did during Lord Grindelwald’s time. Let’s lose no time, Harry. We must return to the main lobby of Gringotts and take another passageway from there.”

Harry followed, feeling slightly excited about the possibility of meeting Grindelwald’s personal guard, and apprehensive about the upcoming task. He could only hope that the Demarr Devil Blade would find him worthy, as Khariana’s ring had.

(End Chapter Three)

Author’s Note: There you have it. Third chapter finished. I didn’t intend for this to be quite as long as it ended up, but I just got into my element during Grilthauk’s story, and everything flowed perfectly. Also, we now understand the source of Grilthauk’s odd knowledge. I hope you all like the Evans vault. I may be using it as one of Harry’s main fortresses later on. He hasn’t yet explored the entire complex, so if anybody has some good ideas about other things to place in there, let me know. Before people complain that I’m needlessly portraying Dumbledore as evil, please try to keep in mind whose point-of-view the tale was coming from. Dumbledore will not be evil. I’m thankful for all the reviews. Honestly, I’m flattered.

Harry followed, feeling slightly excited about the possibility of meeting Grindelwald's personal guard, and apprehensive about the upcoming task. He could only hope that the Demarr Devil Blade would find him worthy, as Khariana's ring had.

Chapter Four: True Form of the Devil Brand – God of Destruction Incarnate

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

For what seemed like the hundredth time that day, Harry followed Grilthauk to yet another new destination. He started to wonder just how much of Gringotts pertained to him in some manner or another. This trip led the pair back out of the Evans complex, located deep underground, and back up to the main lobby of the establishment. Upon exiting the compound itself and entering into the large chamber that led to the passage back into Grilthauk's office, Harry braved another look over at the Nidhogg. The beast was far more menacing awake, with its three heads snorting and moving about, than it ever could have been during its hibernating state. He soon wished he hadn't, as the creature seemed to feel the young part-dakaath's eyes upon it, and simultaneously turned all three of its massive heads to meet Harry's gaze. Harry swore that he could hear his heart pounding through his chest as the huge dragon soared ever so slightly off the ground and floated gracefully over to his and Grilthauk's location. A trio of heads moved within reach of Harry, but none moved to attack. Then, the beast unexpectedly dropped to its knees before him. Harry looked on curiously, as Grilthauk offered an explanation.

"It would seem that the Nidhogg has sensed that you are now the Lord Evans, and has thus acknowledged you as its master, Harry. Otherwise, it surely would have attacked. It will not harm you."

Harry nodded slightly, and moved to pet the great dragon's central head lightly. It purred loudly, and the other two heads moved forward a few inches, obviously expecting the same treatment. Harry obliged amicably, taking ten minutes or so to give his new fortress's guardian some attention. Looking back at Grilthauk, who was watching the scene with a patient expression, brought Harry's mind back to

present matters. He turned to leave, and the dragon seemed to understand on its own, as it flew back over to its previous place of vigil.

Harry and Grilthauk reached the bank lobby quickly enough, but upon arriving, Harry was greeted by a most unwelcome sight: Nymphadora Tonks, loitering about close to the front entrance to the facility, seemingly staking out the area. Harry hoped that the clumsy young auror was simply on her usual patrol, and not looking especially for him. He couldn't imagine that the Order would have noticed him gone from Privet Drive quite yet, but it would still ruin everything for Tonks to see him now. For a moment, Harry contemplated just moving on with Grilthauk, and trusting that his changed looks would keep her from noticing him. On second thought, he decided not to risk it, and ducked back slightly into the corridor from which he and Grilthauk had just come. Grilthauk noticed his young lord's odd action, and turned to see what had made the boy jump. He saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Harry, what is the matter?"

"That woman loitering about the entrance, the auror with the neon green hair. She's a member of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix. There'll be trouble if she sees me here, since I'm supposed to be tucked safe and sound in my relatives' house, or at least so sayeth the old bastard."

"Harry, you are aware, of course, that coming to the lordship of your mother's family automatically makes you an adult by law, correct? She has no authority, legal or otherwise, to take you anywhere, and we would not allow her either way."

No, Harry thought, he wasn't aware that he was now emancipated. He really ought to find a book detailing all of these old pureblooded by-laws now that he officially was one. He'd take a look the next time he visited Flourish and Blotts. Still, Harry knew that his rightful status wouldn't concern Dumbledore a single whit, nor would he likely find any assistance within the Ministry, should it come to some sort of legal battle over the matter. With a bit of annoyance, Harry realized that Grilthauk probably knew this as well, and was testing him.

“Be that as it may, Grilthauk, it would simply cause too much trouble for Dumbledore to know of my location right now, and playing the emancipation card would involve revealing to the old man that I’m Lord Grindelwald’s relation. Needless to say, I would prefer to postpone that particular confrontation for as long as possible. Is there any way to distract her long enough for us to get to this other passage we need to take?”

“Yes, of course.”

With that, Grilthauk stalked out into the main lobby and hailed a few security goblins. Harry watched from his secluded location as the President gave a few rapidly uttered commands in the goblin tongue, and the three particularly menacing goblins marched up to Tonks and demanded her attention. Grilthauk motioned for Harry, and the latter followed the former into a secluded passageway across the main lobby. Surprisingly, the dakaathi hybrid was a bit concerned for Tonks. He was certainly annoyed with Dumbledore and the Order, but he had come to like her in the few times they’d met.

“They aren’t going to hurt her, right?”

Grilthauk arched a wizened eyebrow at Harry.

“I’m surprised that you are concerned. But no, I merely instructed them to question the young woman about her reasons for loitering. She’s doing no particular harm, so they will leave her alone when they realize her status as an auror. We do not recognize the authority of the Ministry of Magic here, but nonetheless, we do our best to avoid confrontations with them unless absolutely necessary. Now, we’re almost there.”

The winding passageway led to its final stretch, as indicated by the large opening ahead. Harry thought he could see the roots of a tree spreading across the upcoming ground, but decided that his eyes were simply playing tricks on him. Why would trees be growing anywhere at Gringotts, after all? However, after exiting the passage and very nearly tripping on them, he realized that he was mistaken. Looking around, Harry found himself in the middle of a darkened forest, as ridiculous as that sounded. Diagon Alley was in London, for Merlin’s sake!

“Goblin, where are we? Why is there a forest smack in the middle of London?”

“Gringotts has owned his land since its founding, and we have simply never developed it. Our destination is not much further.”

Harry followed Grilthauk down a narrow wooded path, becoming increasingly wary as the forest continued to darken. Of course, he realized, he shouldn't be too surprised. It was no doubt rather late at night by now. He had arrived at Gringotts around noon, had his initial meeting with Grilthauk, been tricked into undergoing his dakaathi transformation, passed out for several hours as a result, woken up and admired his new changes, gone down with Grilthauk to his family treasury, taken the grand tour there, heard a long story about his legacy, and he had just now arrived in a bloody forest in the middle of London. Quite a day, he thought with a bit of amusement. Harry was brought out of his musings by a slight rustling noise in the trees around him. Just an animal or something, he surmised, as he continued walking. Another rustling sound...but this one came from several directions. The next step would be his last.

Harry halted on the spot as he felt something sharp sticking into the small of his back. His eyes darted about as nearly a dozen figures, both male and female, judging from the outlines of their tight black outfits, seemed to materialize from nowhere around him. Their faces were shrouded in black cloth that matched the rest of their clothing, and all of them were armed, as Harry noticed with a small wave of irritation. Assassins, perhaps? Could this be Voldemort's doing? Just like that filthy serpent to hire mercenaries to try and do his dirty work. But that would mean...where was Grilthauk, anyway? Coming to the conclusion that he'd been completely tricked, and that his only chance to escape was to somehow fight his way out of this, Harry burned inwardly as the augmented strength and speed gifted by his dakaathi blood instinctually began to manifest.

Steeling himself, he lunged forward slightly, breaking the grip of his physical captor. Harry reached behind him and grabbed the startled assassin by the wrist before the latter had any time to react, flinging the slender man headlong at a small bunch of his cohorts.

Unfortunately, the man regained his balance in midair, shifted his weight back and landed on his feet in front of the rest. Without wasting so much as a second, he whipped out his wand and took aim.

“Stupef...”

Before Harry could finish casting his stunner, a thin rope wrapped tightly around his arm and jerked it backwards, causing his wand to fly from his hand into the dense foliage, completely out of his sight. Forest green eyes blazing, Harry glanced at the source of the intrusion, a female holding the other end of the rope. Knowing he could likely overpower her, Harry pulled forward and swung the rope to his immediate left with both hands. Like before with the other, the woman landed on her feet, but with a small flip in midair. One spoken word summed up Harry’s reaction.

“...Shit.”

Harry realized that he was never going to be able to get even one of this mob off his or her feet long enough to be able to mount any kind of counterattack, and he was wandless besides. There was only one course of action left. Harry bolted down the path in front of him, not daring to go back the way he had come. If this had indeed been part of a Death Eater plot, Voldemort would assuredly have forces waiting to ambush Harry at the entrance, in the case that he managed to escape from his hired goons. As Harry ran, he could vaguely feel himself trample a small animal under his feet on the path. Not that he cared in the slightest, particularly given the current circumstances. He could somehow feel his assailants gaining on him.

He presently passed by a medium-sized wooden house, with a flat roof composed of red-lacquered tiles. Harry paid it no special mind, but upon seeing a dozen or so more similar houses arranged on what appeared to be two sides of a main square, he realized that he had blundered right into the middle of a village. As a few more assassins, dressed in identical garb to those pursuing him, emerged from some of the houses. Harry mentally kicked himself. He had walked right into the tiger’s mouth. The group from the forest caught up with him, and the whole village seemed to be closing in on Harry, who looked around quickly for a means of escape. Finding nothing, he cast his

eyes further down the unpaved street. In the center of a small dais, made of a black stone similar to that of Grindelwald's portal, stood an ominous-looking sword, seemingly suspended in a field of pure dark energy. Harry felt immediately drawn to it, and bolted in its direction.

With a leap, Harry landed on the black stone dais, wings flaring out behind him. He approached the mysterious brand. It had an ornate design, skeletal designs carved into hilt. The blade itself was broad and of a pure black, such that its very physical form appeared to be an illusion, and was roughly five feet in length. Truly, it was akin to looking upon the very essence of death and destruction. It could be nothing else but the Demarr Devil Blade. Almost as if possessed, Harry reached for the brand, barely aware of the protective field surrounding it. The field attempted to resist the intrusion, and Khariana's ring began to resonate with the Demarr Devil Blade. The earth shook with such force that the heavens themselves trembled, and the barrier shattered with a boom greater than a hundred thunderclaps. The assassins in the village below watched, faces mixed with horror and amazement. Path inhibited no longer, Harry grasped the blade by the handle, and a silky, menacing voice sounded within his head.

"Hehehehe...so, the one who would claim me as his own has arrived at last...tell me, boy, what is your name?"

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. He answered out loud.

"My name...? Harry...Harry Evans. Y-you're alive?"

"Of course I'm alive...Harry. Why does that surprise you?"

"W-well...living swords aren't exactly commonplace..."

"How can you be so sure of that? Perhaps you've just never had one bother to communicate with you until now..."

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He decided to brush the comment off.

"You...you're the Demarr Devil Blade, correct?"

“Demarr Devil Blade? I know of no such name. You may call me...Zharrghast.”

Harry's eyes widened, despite all his inherent dakaathi emotional controls. Zharrghast...? Zharrghast as in the fallen god that his great-grandfather had fought against in the demon realm? No, that couldn't be...

The sentient sword that called itself Zharrghast needed no further verbal provocation.

“Hehehehe...you are right to fear me, boy. It is a simple matter for one such as myself to transfer my essence from one medium to another, as I did when that wave of energy obliterated my former body. Surely, it has crumbled to dust within the abyss, but I live on. Did you truly believe that your worthless mortal swine of an ancestor could make an end of ME? Such foolishness...and thus you dare to presume that you are entitled to take me in hand. Pityable, but such is the way of mortals.”

Harry burned inwardly at the insults to both himself and his most distinguished ancestor, but wisely kept his tongue in check. Zharrghast, however, simply dove right into his mind with a level of ease that Voldemort could never hope to match, sifting through his feeling and memories.

“Ahhh...yessssss...open your mind to me, boy. Allow me to feed upon your thoughts and feelings. I can see...such anger and bloodlust within you, festering just beneath the surface of your soul, growing ever stronger. You have not unleashed it yet, but with time, you shall. Ahhh, and you are truly powerful as well, perhaps more so than any other mortal in either realm, human or demon, or at least you shall be when trained properly. You bear the burning emotional focus and essential predisposition towards hate that I find ever so delicious among the human race, as well as the inherent battle lust and consuming pride that make the dakaath the true standard-bearers of the demon realm. Truly the greatest of both realms combined into one single form. Beautiful...a true fallen angel...perhaps you are worthy to take me in hand after all...”

Harry was strangely reminded of the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts. He spoke up again.

“Fallen angel? What do you mean?”

“What, indeed? You and I are much alike, young dakaathling. Both of us have been persecuted time and again by those incapable of understanding us, cast aside for the convenience of those who would pretend to be above us. Your Ministry of Magic made a scapegoat of you, for fear that your continued existence would disturb their corrupt and ordered existence, just as the elder gods cast me out to prevent me from using my powers to disturb theirs. And now, you would fight against their base corruption. You would fight against the false serpent lord, whose mindless ideals would but replace that cancerous regime with another. You would fight against the old fool who stands a fruitless vigil, ever incapable of the great duty he presumes to assume, ever unwilling to stand aside. As I am the incarnate fallen angel, the god cast from the heavens for his supposed sins, so must you be as well. We are kindred spirits...Harry Alphonse Evans, descendent of the fallen seraphii, bastard prince of the dakaath. I will allow you to take me in hand. With my power, you shall slaughter all that would dare rise against you, and you shall provide me with the blood and the souls of your enemies. We shall be as one. Now, let us obliterate these black-garbed swine that would presume to take our life. Let their flesh and blood be the feast with which we will toast our ascendancy.”

And so, Harry lifted the devil brand, the incarnation of the fallen god Zharrghast. Both Harry and Zharrghast glowed with an ethereal aura, forest green mixing with pure black in a harmonious dichotomy of life and death. Turning to meet the assassins, they spoke as one from Harry's mouth, a truly satanic smile adorning the young wizard's fair face.

“So, then...which of you would like to die first?”

Naturally, they received no answer. They recognized the woman that had disarmed Harry earlier by the rope in her hand. Harry raised Zharrghast into a fighting position and prepared to charge, when a familiar voice called out.

“Harry, stop this at once!”

Harry lowered Zharrghast, both knowing that they held the advantage. A harried Grilthauk ran onto the scene. There were a few grass stains on the front of his battle hauberk. A ways behind, an old man hobbled over as well, supported by a young woman. The surprise at seeing Grilthauk was enough to break Zharrghast’s hold on Harry’s mind.

“Harry, there are your allies. You must not fight them!”

“Hmph, pay him no mind. He lies. Slaughter them all.”

Harry whispered to himself.

“No, Grilthauk wouldn’t lie to me; he swore everlasting fealty to my mother’s line, and he hasn’t steered me wrong yet. If these people are my allies, I can’t fight against them.”

“They are useless. I am the only ally you need. Kill them. Acknowledge our true nature.”

Harry wavered, torn between listening to reason and hearing Grilthauk out, and indulging his rising lust for blood and succumbing to Zharrghast’s wishes. Thankfully, curiosity won out in the end, and Harry moved to place Zharrghast on the altar above which he had been sealed. Zharrghast sensed Harry’s decision, and was only slightly annoyed.

“Very well then, I shall prod you no further. You shall see the true state of things with time. Perhaps these swine shall even prove moderately useful, should the little goblin be indeed telling the truth. If there shall be no bloodshed today, I shall return to my rest. Know that when your hand rested upon me, our souls became as one. I shall remain here. To cross over time and space is no matter for me. Whenever you have need of me, all you need do is call out to me with your mind. I shall hear your plea and come to your hand. Until then, my fallen angel.”

With that, Zharrghast returned to his initial position above the dais, and the protective shield returned. There was no need for concern. His fallen angel would succumb in time, and then Zharrghast would have a suitable vessel with which to conquer the mortal realms and rise up against the elder gods once more. Yes, he could afford to wait. After all, what was a short few months or years to an immortal?

Harry fixed his eyes on Grilthauk, his mind pulsing from having been host to Zharrghast. The ease with which the latter was able to worm his way into Harry's consciousness and assume control frightened the young part-dakaath. At that moment, he decided that he would find a way to control Zharrghast, and until then, he would not call upon the cursed sentient blade unless absolutely necessary. Harry could feel the pure power he had held with Zharrghast in his hand. Had Grilthauk not arrived, they...that is, Harry and Zharrghast could well have obliterated the better part of London with one blast of chaotic energy. With that power, Harry knew that destroying his enemies would likely be as easy as turning over his hand, but he just didn't consider the whole idea to be worth sacrificing his soul over. He could surely find other ways to accomplish his destiny. Shaking his head, he walked down the dais to where Grilthauk was waiting, the terrified eyes of the assassins and villagers squarely on him the entire way.

"Harry, thank the ancestors, you're all right. I had truly feared the worst. The Shinn Kohaku have never taken kindly to strangers. I should have notified them of our coming first. First we were separated, and then I was attacked from behind. When I came to, I hurried to the village as quickly as possible to notify the leader of your ascendancy and disappearance within the forest. When I arrived, I saw that the entire village gathered at the dais, and went to investigate. And then...what happened, Harry?"

Of course, Harry thought. That's who these people are. Grilthauk had mentioned that Lord Grindelwald's elite personal guards, who Harry knew, were guarding the Dema...Zharrghast, were a contingent of ninja from the Shinn Kohaku clan. Harry's memory lapse had nearly cost both his own life and those of some of his staunchest allies. Such mistakes were unacceptable, and Harry vowed to be more careful in the future. He supposed he ought to give Grilthauk an answer. Harry spoke of being ambushed in the forest by the Shinn

Kohaku, of attempting to fight back and being disarmed, and of fleeing from them into the village. Harry realized that the “animal” he had supposedly trampled down back in the forest was probably Grilthauk, but decided, for the sake of the old goblin’s pride, to let him continue to think that he’s been attacked. It didn’t really matter to Harry. At this point, the old man from earlier, who had long since made it over to their position, spoke up.

“It would appear, young one, that we owe you an apology. You were forced to undergo this terrible ordeal because we attacked you, with no provocation on your part. Please accept our sincerest apologies.”

At least he has some shame, Harry mused.

“Apology accepted. Think nothing of it. All that matters is that we’re all alive and well. May I ask your name?”

The old man bowed slightly. The young woman at his side helped him back up. She was pretty, Harry thought, getting a better look at her. She looked to be in her early twenties, and had soft, sparkling brown eyes and creamy porcelain skin. Her hair was a raven black, much like Cho Chang’s, but without the shine, and was put up in a ponytail. Harry figured that it probably extended slightly below her shoulderblades when let down. She was a bit taller than most girls her age, being just a few inches shorter than Harry was.

“Ah, yes, of course. My name is Kenzo Kurahama, the elder and leader of this village. The young lady next to me is my granddaughter, Hitomi.”

Harry returned Kenzo’s bow respectfully, and flashed Hitomi a small grin, which she returned shyly.

“Harry Alphonse Evans, great-grandson of Lord Grindelwald. The pleasure is mine.”

At that revelation, shocked whispers began to circulate among the town’s populace. Most looked to Kenzo for direction. The old Shinn Kohaku leader walked up to Harry and took his hand, examining Khariana’s ring, which he knew that only one bearing Grindelwald’s

blood and legacy could wear. The very fact that it adorned Harry's finger was proof enough for Kenzo. He turned to his villagers and nodded with a beaming smile. Almost like a wave, the Shinn Kohaku, including those who had tried to kill Harry not an hour earlier, fell to their knees and kowtowed before the new lord. Harry arched an eyebrow at the display, and turned to Grilthauk, who in turn spoke to Kenzo.

"Master Kurahama, our young lord has had a tiring day. Perhaps we could have a seat somewhere and talk? We have much to discuss."

"Of course, general. We'll have a seat in my house."

With that, Kenzo headed off toward the largest house in the village, a two-story abode built much in the same style as the other, smaller ones, Hitomi supporting him. Harry followed, and Grilthauk took up the rear.

Upon entering the abode, Harry, Kenzo and Grilthauk all took seats at a small table in the main room, with Hitomi standing a step behind her grandfather. Kenzo turned back to her.

"Hitomi, dear, would you be so kind as to brew us some tea? I have much to discuss with the general and our young lord."

"Yes, grandpa."

She smiled slightly, noticing Harry's gaze on her, but left to make the tea. Meanwhile, Grilthauk turned to Harry.

"Now, what exactly happened when you laid hands upon the Demarr Devil Bla..."

Harry interrupted.

"...Zharrghast."

Grilthauk looked confused, but there was an underlying horror dawning in his eyes, indicating that the old goblin chieftain half suspected the truth and was desperately hoping that Harry would not confirm it. Kenzo wore a guarded expression, a result of his own

years of mental training in the Shinn Kohaku, but Harry ventured a guess that the village leader that arrived at a similar conclusion.

“The sword, the Demarr Devil Blade, is sentient. It spoke to me as I touched it, and indicated that its true identity was in fact that of Zharrghast, the fallen god that my great-grandfather, the late Lord Grindelwald, battled during his last years within the demon realm. According to what I was told, Zharrghast transferred his own essence into the brand just as his body was hit with the reflected pulse of chaos energy during the battle. Tell me, did Lord Grindelwald ever wield the sword after defeating Zharrghast?”

Grilthauk answered.

“No, Harry. Lord Grindelwald was far too old by then to possibly have been able to wield a sword of that size. It would appear that he unwittingly brought our worst nightmare into our world. He was not aware that Zharrghast lived within the brand, of that I am certain.”

Kenzo spoke up as well.

“Tell me, young lord. What else did the blade, did Zharrghast tell you?”

“He told me that he and I are kindred spirits, of sorts, and that our souls were bonded when we made physical contact. He said that if I ever had need of him, that all I had to do was call out, and he would come. Until then, he seems content to remain in stasis. What bothers me the most is that he seemed to be able to assume control of my mind at will while I wielded him. Grilthauk’s arrival diverted his concentration just long enough for me to be able to regain control and shove him out.”

Grilthauk spoke up again, looking pensive.

“Zharrghast is an entity of the purest evil, the very incarnation of destruction. His presence here is very dangerous, especially given the fact that he has a link to you, Harry. I would advise not calling upon him, unless circumstances yield absolutely no other recourse.”

Harry looked back at the old goblin.

"I had already come to that conclusion on my own, Grilthauk. Enough talk about Zharrghast, let's move on to another subject. "

"Very well, what do you plan to do now? Unfortunately, we have lost the Demarr Devil Blade as a viable resource. Regrettable, but it can be overcome. Now, Harry, I think I should warn you that though your dakaathi transformation has been completed due to the effects of the potion, your body and magic still needs that full month to adjust to the changes. I would suggest using the mean time to train."

Harry agreed with Grilthauk's suggestion. He wasn't about to go around attacking Death Eaters or anything of the like during the summer. Harry was perfectly content to let Dumbledore and Voldemort pick each other's forces apart, at least for the time being.

"Sounds good to me. I'll head back down to the compound tomorrow and pick up the needed tomes and items. First, I need to decide where I'm going to stay. I need somewhere that I can do spellwork without the Ministry catching onto me."

At this point, Hitomi returned with tea. Her glance lingered on Harry for a few moments longer than necessary. Kenzo continued the discussion.

"If I may offer a suggestion, young lord? Perhaps it would be prudent for us to commence setting up an information network of sorts. It would be much easier for us to keep track of enemy movements if we had certain operatives placed in strategic areas, keeping an eye out for odd occurrences and an ear out for any useful information. As for your lodgings, I would be honored if you would consider staying here in the village. There are wards in place here to stop the Ministry of Magic's detectors. Our actions tonight have caused you great hardship. The least we can do is offer our hospitality."

Harry turned back to the village leader. The tea was making him noticeably drowsy.

“That sounds like an excellent offer, yes, I think I’ll take you up on it. As for the espionage network, I’ll consider the matter. We’ll discuss it again later.”

Kenzo nodded.

“You look to be quite tired, young lord. Perhaps you might want to get some rest? These matters can all be discussed later. Hitomi, please show the young lord to the guest room.”

“Yes, grandpa. Right this way, my lord.”

Harry, too tired to argue, took his leave of Grilthauk and followed Hitomi up the stairs. They stopped outside one of the upstairs rooms. Harry opened the door, nodding his thanks to Hitomi.

“My lord?”

Harry turned back to the young woman.

“Yes? And please, call me Harry.”

“Very well. Please accept my thanks, Harry, for accepting grandpa’s offer to stay here. The events of this evening were weighing heavily upon him. He would have felt much worse had you declined.”

Harry sent her a small smile.

“You’re welcome. Good night.”

“Yes, good night, Harry.”

With one last glance at Harry, Hitomi returned downstairs. For his part, Harry plopped immediately onto the futon, not even bothering to remove his robe. Folding his wings around himself like a protective shroud, Harry fell quickly asleep, the life-changing events of the past day weighing heavily on his mind.

(End Chapter Four)

Author's Note: Hmm, I don't really know how I feel about this one. I really thought the quality started to go barreling downhill after the entire scene with Harry and Zharrghast. However, I needed to keep going, because I wanted to begin the next chapter at the "next morning" point. I'll be honest about it, I'm much less satisfied with this chapter than I have been with the others, but I guess that just happens sometimes. I hope you all like it more than I did. There'll be a lot more discussion of the Shinn Kohaku in the next chapter, but I figured poor Harry already had dealt with enough for one day and needed a good night's sleep. Thanks for the reviews, as usual.

With one last glance at Harry, Hitomi returned downstairs. For his part, Harry plopped immediately onto the futon, not even bothering to remove his robe. Folding his wings around himself like a protective shroud, Harry fell quickly asleep, the life-changing events of the past day weighing heavily on his mind.

Chapter Five: A Familiar Face Joins the Force – A New Romance Blooms?

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry awoke the next morning in a strange, but oddly familiar room. His head still felt like it had taken a direct hammer blow from the Whomping Willow. Harry tried to think of the circumstances that had brought him here. He could remember meeting Grilthauk, and visiting his family vault. Then, he could vaguely recall following the old goblin through another passageway at Gringotts and into a dark forest, and being attacked by strange, black-garbed figures, losing his wand in the struggle, and fleeing into a village. After that, everything started to blur. He had a slight, hazy mental picture of himself standing before an ominous-looking sword on a black dais. The Demarr Devil Blade, he reasoned. Harry couldn't remember exactly how he had come into contact with the sword, or how he had managed to end up in this sparsely furnished, but comfortable room. Given the fact that he was in no serious pain, aside from the headache, and that he wasn't physically restrained in any manner, Harry decided that he wasn't in any particular danger at the moment, and to look around.

He stumbled down a wooden staircase into a large room. A quick glance out the front window indicated that it was still dark outside. Odd, Harry thought, he could remember it being dark when he entered the forest the previous day, and his body felt well rested. He could see men and women going about their daily tasks outside. A soft female voice behind Harry diverted his attention from the scene.

"Oh, you're awake? Did you sleep well, my lo...Harry?"

Harry turned back in the direction of the voice. He looked over the young woman. Raven black hair, soft Oriental features, captivating

brown eyes. Harry, in his confused state, identified the figure before him with the only person he knew that fit her general physique.

“Cho...?”

A glimmer of hurt crossed her features, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

“No, Hitomi. Don’t you remember?”

Oh, real smooth, Harry thought. He could have kicked himself. He didn’t really feel all that guilty about the slip, but realized that there was no point to doing anything to hurt her feelings any further, like telling a blatant lie, so he simply decided to be honest.

“My apologies. I’m not even really sure where I am at the moment. I just woke up with a killer headache, and I’m still trying to piece together what exactly happened last night and how I got here.”

A slight smile told Harry that his mistake was forgiven.

“Oh, of course. You’ve been through quite an ordeal. It’s no wonder your mind is fragmented. Please, come with me. I’ll draw you a bath and get you a change of clothing.”

With that, Hitomi softly, almost reverently, took Harry by the wrist and led him back upstairs into the house’s bathing room. He would have been perfectly capable of following her on his own, but he certainly had no problem with the contact, so he simply indulged her by allowing her to lead him along. Upon arrival, she let go of his wrist and drew up a hot bath. Motioning for Harry to disrobe and step into the bath with that same soft smile, she made for the door. Upon hearing the soft click indicating that she was gone, Harry took off his silk robe. He noted with a twinge of annoyance that it was effectively ruined, with two gaping holes in the back from where his wings had originally broken through in Grilthauk’s office. Harry removed his undergarments and stretched his wings to full span as he prepared to enter the wooden tub. The fumes from the warm, scented water began to lift the haze surrounding his mind somewhat.

“Your wings are beautiful, Harry...”

Harry turned back, to see Hitomi still standing there, gazing unabashedly at him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She had never left the room. Harry was slightly surprised, as he had quickly pegged her as being rather timid. He decided to have a little bit of fun with her.

“Yes, I think so too. So, are you planning on watching me bathe?”

“Of course. Does that bother you?”

“Not necessarily. I don’t have anything to be shy about. But realize that I get to watch you in the bath as well, should I want to.”

Again, that soft smile. Harry was beginning to realize that it was no indicator of shyness or timidity. He wondered what that smile really meant.

“As you wish, Harry. I have nothing to hide.”

Perhaps as an attempt to validate her statement, she nonchalantly slipped the top of her tight-fitting robe off of her shoulders and down her body a bit, exposing her breasts enough to indicate that she was wearing nothing underneath. Harry cocked an eyebrow and tore his eyes from the admittedly splendid view, unwilling to be caught staring. She was a bit better endowed than he had thought. Not large, but definitely by no means small. Well, Harry thought, she certainly wasn’t anywhere near as timid as he had thought her to be. Or was it his dakaathi charm that was causing her to act this way? Without further ado, he plunged into the tub.

Harry could still feel the young woman’s eyes on him as he bathed. As he lathered his body, he could feel the last vestiges of his disorientation melting away. The scented, medicated water, hot enough to melt wrought iron, felt like a small burst of heaven against his tired body. Significantly cleaned and rejuvenated, Harry stood up, back facing the still watching Hitomi, and reached for a towel. His hand had barely moved before he could feel a towel drying his back and legs, moving around to the front of his body. Once finished, the

towel wrapped around his waist, and a soft hand on Harry's shoulder gently turned him around.

Harry looked down slightly. He met Hitomi's brown eyes as the latter tied the towel off at his waist. She was so close, he couldn't resist the urge to move those last few inches and capture her soft pink lips with his own. As soon as they met, she pulled back, that same soft smile adorning her face.

"I'm certain grandpa is awake and waiting for breakfast, Harry. Your robe is on the table over here. As soon as you're dressed, come and meet us in the dining room."

She left, running her hand slightly along Harry's chest and shoulder as she did so. She was obviously interested in him, so he took no offense to her pulling back. Harry really didn't want Kenzo to come into the room and find him tongue wrestling with his granddaughter, anyway. There'd be enough time later. He had the entire summer, after all.

Harry looked over at the robe Hitomi had left for him. It was a Japanese yukata, white with forest green print. She had made two large incisions in the back for Harry to feed his wings through. It suited him very well, he thought. He put the garment on, hopefully correctly, and started for his shoes, only to find them missing. In their place, Harry saw a pair of padded wooden sandals. After fitting those onto his feet, Harry started back downstairs for the dining room.

Upon arrival, he found not only Kenzo and Hitomi sitting at the table, but Grilthauk as well. And seated to Grilthauk's right was another familiar figure. One with long red hair pulled back into a ponytail, wearing flashy robes and dragonhide boots. A single dragon fang earring pierced his left ear. It was Bill Weasley, member of the Order of the Phoenix and Ron's eldest brother. Harry had only met Bill once or twice, but was fairly certain that his loyalties lied staunchly with the old man, just like those of the rest of his family, barring Percy. He had no idea what the redhead was doing there, but figured that Grilthauk had something to do with it, given Bill's employment at Gringotts. Remembering that doubting the old goblin's loyalties just the previous evening had nearly caused Harry to make a gigantic blunder, he took his seat warily, eyeing Bill. Kenzo turned to Harry.

“Good morning, young lord. I hope you slept well?”

“Yes, just fine, sir.”

“Please, Kenzo.”

“Okay, Kenzo. I woke up with a bit of a headache, but a hot bath cleared that up nicely.”

“Yes, our medicated water always does the trick. You must be hungry. Hitomi, please prepare and bring in the morning meal.”

The young woman nodded and left for the kitchen, taking one last glance back at Harry. Grilthauk took advantage of the silence to speak up.

“Now, Harry, you must be wondering why I’ve brought Mr. Weasley here this morning.”

Harry sneered inwardly, but kept his face impassive.

“Why, yes, Grilthauk, I must say that I am. Please explain.”

“Very well. You may have assumed that Mr. Weasley’s loyalties are to Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, but that is only partially correct. He is, in fact, an Order member, but he has also been secretly supplying Gringotts with detailed information about the Order’s activities for the entire duration of his time back in Britain. It is for that purpose that we recalled him to begin with. Beyond that, he has been relaying to us any snippets he manages to gleam of both the Ministry and Voldemort through the Order. He has been an invaluable resource to Gringotts.

We, after all, have a vested interest in the goings on outside our doors, and not many wizards are willing to trust a goblin with any sort of sensitive information.”

Bill was a spy? Harry was a bit surprised at that, but figured that he was a good fit for the role, with his suave personality and natural

good looks. At least more fitting than Snape. Still, that did nothing to quell Harry's misgivings about the man.

"Yes, that's all fine and good, but I'd still bet my last galleon that he's going to go and snitch my location to the old man as soon as he leaves here."

Bill shot Harry a disarming smile, which did little to faze the young part-dakaath.

"Harry, I'm shocked and appalled. Don't worry, mate. The President has told me everything about what's going on here, and I'm on your side. I'll swear a wizard's oath to the effect, if it'll make you feel more secure."

Kenzo looked between the two with a sinister smile of his own.

"Do not worry, young lord. If nothing else, my people are on your side, and if he does in fact show himself to be untrue to our cause, we will hold him to a full interrogation of our own. I can assure you that his death would be most unpleasant. However, I can see burden of truth within his eyes, and I am not easily fooled, even at my old age. There is nothing to be apprehensive about."

Harry nodded.

"Very well. Tell me, Bill, is the Order aware that I've left Privet Drive yet?"

"Not yet, Harry. You only left yesterday, after all. That was a pretty risky move you pulled, by the way. I don't know how long you thought you'd be able to fool us, but I'd give it two more days at most before the game's up. Moody can see through the walls of the house, and Lupin can tell whether or not you're there by scent."

Harry hadn't thought of Lupin, but it didn't matter now.

"Good, let Dumbledore sweat for awhile. It's the least he deserves. Anyway, why are you on my side in all this? You do know what we're planning to do, don't you?"

“Let’s just say that I agree with you on a lot of issues.”

At this point, Hitomi returned with a breakfast of grilled fish, steamed rice and miso soup, with tea to drink. Definitely not the morning fare that Harry was used to, but it was actually quite good. Harry wasn’t sure whether or not to attribute it to her cooking skills, though. After all, even Aunt Petunia could steam rice properly. He could feel her eyes on him on more than one occasion as he ate. Harry ate his meal quickly, and waited quietly for the rest of the host to finish. Grilthauk was the first to speak up again.

“As I was saying before, Harry, I have brought Mr. Weasley here for a specific reason. His tenure as a curse breaker for Gringotts had led him to become quite the accomplished duelist, and he is tactically gifted as well. I have relieved him of current duties at the bank temporarily, and have asked him to assist in your training over the course of your stay here. He will spend his working days here in the village with you, and will continue to tend to his Order duties as well.”

“And you will vouch for his loyalty as well?”

Harry directed a sidelong glance at Bill as he said this, only to see the redhead give a small nod of approval, perhaps impressed with the fact that he wasn’t willing to trust easily, even for his best mate’s family.

“Yes, Harry. I can assure you that my trust is not easily given. Mr. Weasley is completely loyal to our cause. Now, we ought to head back down to the Evans compound and retrieve the supplies that you will need for your training.

Mr. Weasley will accompany us.”

“I’ll be needing my wand back, first of all. It got knocked into the forest during my struggle with the Shinn Kohaku last night.”

Kenzo immediately produced Harry’s wand from the waist of his yukata.

"Here you are, young lord. I instructed a few of the men from the village to find it last night, after you went to sleep. Thankfully, its color stood out amongst the foliage."

Harry nodded at the village leader and stood, with Grilthauk and Bill following. Upon reaching the door, Harry turned back around and saw Hitomi still looking at him, almost expectantly. Harry sighed inwardly, guessing what she wanted.

"Would you like to come with us? That is, if you don't mind, Kenzo?"

Hitomi turned to her grandfather with pleading eyes. The old Shinn Kohaku leader responded with a smile.

"If she would like to go, I have no objections."

She strode over to the rest of the small party without a word. A part-demon, an old goblin, a kunoichi, and wizarding Britain's answer to Indiana Jones...what a crew, Harry thought wordlessly. They ventured through the still darkened forest, Harry and Hitomi bringing up the rear.

"Is this your first time out of the forest, Hitomi? You seemed rather anxious about coming along, after all."

She turned to look at Harry.

"Yes, our people have been living in this forest, secluded from the rest of the world, for the last fifty years, ever since the fall of the Great Grindelwald. We have long awaited the day for his descendent to take up arms and call us to battle again, to free us from our curse."

"Curse...?"

Hitomi looked away, almost shamefully.

"You should ask grandpa about that, Harry."

Harry understood, and let the subject drop.

Presently, they reached the entrance to Gringotts. The winding passageway led back to the main lobby of the bank, as Harry rearranged his hair to conceal his scar and folded his wings around his body so that they blended in with the yukata he wore. Harry was confident that his Japanese outfit combined with the physical changes from his dakaathi transformation would make him nearly impossible to recognize to even those who knew him best, and so he took no particular care to look out for patrolling Order members. Hitomi was a bit startled at all the noise, having spent her entire life in a quiet village, but hid her discomfort well. Grilthauk led the way to his office, which was now cleaned of debris, but still empty and ruined, and from there down into the Evans compound. Bill jumped at the sight of the Nidhogg, which roared and advanced threateningly at both him and Hitomi, until Harry calmed the beast with a small motion. Bill turned to Harry.

“Merlin’s beard, Harry. Charlie would auction off his first-born son for a look at this thing.”

“I assumed the same about Hagrid. Speaking of which, we perhaps ought to discuss the possibilities of manufacturing his rock cakes as artillery.”

Bill retorted with a mock chiding voice.

“That’s not nice, Harry. I’d pity whoever might happen to take a hit from one of Hagrid’s concoctions at high velocity. Not even Voldemort deserves that.”

Grilthauk looked at the pair with a calculating expression that indicated that he was actually considering the idea. They reached the vault door. Harry borrowed Hitomi’s small dagger and pricked his finger, smearing the blood on the door in order to gain access. Once inside, they decided to split up into two groups in order to cover territory quickly. Grilthauk handed a magically enlarged bag to Bill, who was instructed head for the library to retrieve whatever tomes he felt Harry might need for his training, as well as a book on chaotic magic. Hitomi went with Bill, while Grilthauk took Harry to the magical creature room, to the latter’s confusion.

“Grilthauk, why are we here?”

“I believe that you may benefit from taking one or two of the creatures from this room and raising them as familiars. These pets are magically bonded to your line, and will be more steadfastly loyal to you than any soldier ever could. Besides, I am certain there will come a time where their protection will make the difference in saving your life.”

Harry wasn't entirely convinced, but decided to heed the old goblin's advice.

“How should I know which ones to take?”

“Just wander around, Harry. If my knowledge of the way these eggs work is correct, you will feel a sort of connection to the ones best suited to you.”

Slightly annoyed and more than a little skeptical, Harry began to traverse the rows and columns of eggs that filled the massive room. After a few minutes of wandering, Harry did indeed feel drawn to a pair of striped eggs situated near a remote corner of the room. One was orange with black stripes, the other white with black stripes. Harry motioned for Grilthauk to come over.

“These are the ones, Harry? Good, now simply lay the palms of your hands against them.”

“Right.”

Harry did so, and the eggs began to glow magically and heat up. After a minute or so, they hatched, revealing a pair of tiger cubs underneath. One seemed to be of the Bengal variety, the other was a Siberian White. They were rather cute, Harry supposed, but they seemed no more dangerous than muggle animals.

“Grilthauk...these are just muggle tigers. They aren't going to stand up against Death Eaters or the like.”

“Do not be so judgmental, Harry. Try to think of a spell that might tell you more about them before drawing any conclusions. This place is warded against the Ministry’s underage magic detectors, so have no worries on that front.”

A revealing spell, perhaps? One for animals...Harry decided to test his limited knowledge of Latin and spell design. Oh, he was certain the spell did exist already, but he didn’t actually know it. Here goes nothing, Harry thought.

“Revelo Anima.”

Somehow, it worked. Harry could “see” the biographical information about each creature in his mind. Apparently, the two tigers were magical cousins of the two muggle species, now very much endangered. The Bengal had an affinity to fire, with claws and teeth capable of melting solid rock on contact, and breath of searing flames. The Siberian White had similar abilities, but with an affinity to cold. Its claws and teeth were capable of freezing molten steel within a coffin of ice, and its breath could inflict severe frostbite. Apparently the Bengal was a male and the Siberian White was a female. Harry decided to name them Grindelwald and Khariana, respectively, after his great-grandparents. The cubs nodded slightly as he made the decision, almost as if they understood without needing to be told. Amazing, Harry acknowledged. He turned back to Grilthauk.

“Well, are we finished here, Grilthauk?”

“I believe so, Harry. Let us go back to meet Bill and the young lady.”

As they passed the room containing the arkanite ore, Grilthauk stopped Harry.

“What is it?”

“I would like your permission to take a large quantity of the arkanite to be melted down into a magical steel alloy, with which to coat the weapons and armor of the goblin forces, as well as to tip our arrows. We goblins cannot fight with wands as you wizards do. This alloy may provide us the edge we need to stand equal to human opponents.”

Harry nodded. It was a good idea, and he didn't really have much use for the metal himself. He did want some left over for his personal use, though, just in case.

"Yes, that'll be fine. Just make sure to leave a sizable quantity left over for my own use. I'm sure I'll have need of it at some point. We can leave the vault doors open when we depart. Just have some of the goblins come down to retrieve the material. I'll instruct the Nidhogg to let them pass freely. Just don't forget to close the vault back up when you're finished."

"Very well, Harry. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Think nothing of it."

The two, dakaath and goblin, returned to the main hall of the complex, where Bill and Hitomi were already waiting. Grindelwald and Khariana trailed behind Harry at a few paces. Hitomi squealed girlishly at the sight of the two cubs, having never seen many animals aside from those used for food in the village, and played with them for a moment. Harry turned to the eldest Weasley son.

"Find anything good, Bill?"

"Did I ever. Some of these books are absolutely priceless. I've never even heard of most of these spells. Voldemort, and Dumbledore, for that matter, would go to surprising lengths to get their hands on any of these, to say nothing of collectors."

"Excellent. Maybe you'll get something out of this whole training deal as well, then. Shall we head back to the village, then?"

Grilthauk nodded.

"An excellent suggestion, Harry. Bill?"

"It's getting near lunch hour. I have to apparate over to Headquarters and give Dumbledore my midday report. Basically tell the old man that nothing out of the ordinary's happened. He wants me to look into

that energy burst that happened here yesterday. Don't worry, Harry, my occlumency's strong enough that he won't be able to sneak into my head without my knowing, and he has no reason to suspect me. I'll join you lot back in the village in a few hours."

"Right, take care, Bill."

Bill nodded and left ahead of the rest of the group. Harry and Grilthauk turned to leave as well. The two cubs followed Harry, as well as a slightly blushing Hitomi. Their journey back to the forest entrance was uneventful, at which point Grilthauk took his leave of the two. After all, he had his own business to attend to as Gringotts President, and also needed to oversee the retrieval of the arkanite. Harry and Hitomi began the trek back to the village alone with the cubs.

"It's always dark here. Why is that?"

Hitomi turned to Harry.

"It's a constant reminder. Grandpa can tell you more about it."

Harry nodded, assuming it had something to do with that curse Hitomi was unwilling to discuss earlier. He decided to take a chance, and took her hand in his as they walked. She only smiled, and they continued to walk wordlessly. It was nice, Harry thought. He didn't feel himself falling in love really, nor did he have that odd butterfly sensation that had always seemed to accompany his encounters with Cho Chang. He did, however, note that he enjoyed being in Hitomi's company more than usual. They reached the village a little too quickly for Harry's liking, and he released her hand. Grindelwald and Khariana ran into the small garden behind Kenzo's abode and played in the grass, as Harry and Hitomi went inside.

They had a small lunch of chicken and rice with Kenzo, which consisted mostly of small talk about Harry's life before coming to the village. Harry entertained the two Shinn Kohaku with tales of his adventures at Hogwarts, taking no particular pleasure in the subject himself. Before long, Bill returned as promised, confirming that nothing untoward had happened with the old man, and that Dumbledore and the Order were still unaware of Harry's departure

from the Dursleys'. After taking a cup of tea, Bill instructed Harry to accompany him back into the garden, where the first of their lessons would take place.

There really wasn't much to the day's training, given by a small lighting fire. Bill only had a few hours before he was expected back from work. He mostly instructed Harry on proper magical dueling form, and reviewed some of the more basic light-oriented combat spells, such as stunners and basic Hogwarts curriculum charms and jinxes. It was all stuff that Harry had already learned in Charms, and in Defense during those odd years where there had miraculously been a competent teacher. The lesson was finished quickly, giving Bill an hour or so to sit and talk with Harry.

"Tell me, Bill, why are you really doing this? Helping me, I mean. I'm sure you know that I'm eventually going to have to stand against Dumbledore. Are you really willing to become an outcast within your family, like Percy? Besides, people will revile me as a dark wizard for what I'm planning to do, and perhaps rightly so. Do you really want to throw your lot in with me? There's still time to back out. One quick Obliviate and you can go back to where you were before today. I wouldn't hold a grudge against you."

Bill looked at Harry, complete seriousness in his eyes.

"I know exactly what I'm doing, Harry. First, please don't ever compare me to Percy again. And I mean, ever. Percy is motivated entirely by ambition and greed, with no sense of what's right and what's wrong, and he has no real loyalty to anybody but himself. He's no better than the likes of Lucius Malfoy. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see Percy bearing the Dark Mark himself."

"I didn't mean to compare your motivations to his, Bill..."

"I know, Harry. I was just saying. Now, I've chosen to throw my lot in with you because you're willing to do what needs to be done. Why do you think I chose to pursue a career at Gringotts? Don't get me wrong, I love what I do for a living, but I started here simply to avoid working for the Ministry. It's rotten and corrupt, Harry, more than even you know, and something has to be done. Voldemort? Don't make me

laugh. He's just a base creature, with no plan for our world's future. He simply wants to pillage and burn and kill. It won't stop when or if he defeats Dumbledore, or you, he'll keep going until there's nothing left. He must be stopped, Harry, as quickly as possible. That's why I joined the Order, not for any loyalty to its leader."

Bill paused to take a breath.

"As for fighting against Dumbledore, his time has passed, Harry. He couldn't lead us in the first war, and he can't in this one. If nothing changes, it's only a matter of time until Voldemort wipes us out. Don't get me wrong, I think he's a good man and that he means only the best. But he's a very old man, Harry, and he's so used to his position as guardian in our world now that I don't think he's even emotionally able to step aside. Our world is going to continue on this downward spiral as long as he's in charge, and doing nothing, and he has to be removed, even if by force. Our world's future belongs to us, Harry, and we have to seize it with our own hands. After talking with the President, I'm convinced that you're the one that can do it, and I'll follow you to the bitter end, that I promise."

Harry didn't know what to say, aside from one thing.

"Thanks, Bill. I promise that I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, Harry. Get some rest tonight. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. We'll be starting in on the basics of the Dark Arts. I plan to have you ready and able to take on even the most seasoned of Death Eaters by the summer's end. I have to be heading back to the Burrow, mum's expecting me for supper. See you tomorrow, Harry."

"Later, Bill."

With that, Bill left. Harry was pleasantly surprised with how easily he was able to talk with the eldest Weasley. Bill possessed a level of maturity that the likes of Ron and the twins couldn't even begin to understand.

Dinner was a rather uneventful affair. Hitomi had prepared a tasty meal of tempura and cucumber salad, but Harry had so much on his

mind after his conversation with Bill that he took little notice of his companions. The few times he looked up at Hitomi, she was always looking right at him. Had he been more astute, Harry would have noticed Kenzo looking at the pair of them with a knowing grin. Earlier, Harry had meant to ask Kenzo more about the Shinn Kohaku and that “curse” Hitomi had mentioned, but it simply slipped his mind.

After finishing his meal, excusing himself and washing up, Harry headed up to his room with the intention of reading over some basic Dark Arts material in order to be better prepared for the next day’s training with Bill. What he found was Hitomi sprawled out on his futon, smiling up at him with that unreadable smile of hers.

“Did you have a difficult time with Bill, Harry? You seemed distracted at supper.”

Harry looked down at her guardedly.

“No, we mostly talked. But yes, I had a lot to think about.”

“So, you didn’t get around to much training, then?”

“There wasn’t enough time.”

“Then, you have no excuse to avoid training now?”

Harry was starting to get a bit irritated with the veiled questions, but kept his voice neutral.

“What training are you talking about, Hitomi? I need to rest for tomorrow.”

Her smile became a bit more pronounced.

“No, I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Harry...”

Now he was annoyed, and oblivious, as it would turn out. He never got a chance to retort, as she was latched onto him with a speed that only a trained Shinn Kohaku could hope to match. Harry didn’t have a prayer. Her lips melted against his ear, tongue darting in as she

pulled him down onto the futon. Needless to say, Harry was stunned. She pulled out and nipped playfully on his earlobe before whispering.

“This training, Harry.”

[Content removed.]

(End Chapter Five)

Author's Note: Chapter Five completed, my longest yet. I hope that the scene at the end wasn't too graphic for anybody, but I can't really see how it could have been. I intended to get through Harry's month in the village in this one chapter, but after introducing Bill (an idea that came to me on a whim), things just took off, and I'll need another chapter or two, I think.

Right, Harry thought, he doubted Kenzo was hard of hearing to the point that he couldn't discern what was just going on. For his first time with a girl, an older girl at that, he thought he had done rather well. She hadn't complained, at least. As anxious as he was to prepare for the coming battles, Harry realized that it wasn't Bill's lessons that he would be looking forward to. He eventually fell asleep somehow, tea and raspberries in his thoughts.

Chapter Six: Training – A Month's Passage

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry awoke early the next morning, or at least he imagined. After all, both the village and the surrounding forest seemed to be eternally plunged in darkness. He resolved to ask Kenzo about that during breakfast, as he would rather not have the mystery on his mind during his first real training session with Bill. The thought of "training" brought on a wave of mental images from the previous night's activities, of Hitomi spread out on his futon, kissing and biting, her unique taste of sweet tea mixed with raspberries. If not for the countless love bites stinging his neck, shoulders and chest, Harry would have thought it to be a very pleasurable dream. He decided to head into the bathing room and take a dip in the medicated water. Hopefully the stuff would again prove as miraculous as it had been the previous morning, and would heal the bites quickly and remove the marks. Harry really didn't want to have to answer any questions on the subject.

Harry moved quietly towards his destination, and reached it without stirring any incident. Upon arriving, however, he found that he wasn't the only one that had decided to take an early morning soak in the tub. Hitomi was already there, lolling about lazily in the bath, naked as the day she was born. Harry stood quietly in the doorway, observing her beautiful form. The kunoichi's trained senses quickly alerted her to his presence, and she turned to acknowledge Harry. Soft brown eyes met forest green, as she cocked her head slightly and gave him that peculiar smile of hers.

"So, are you planning on watching me bathe?"

Harry chuckled inwardly, remembering the conversation from the previous morning. He allowed a bit of humor to seep into his tone.

“Of course, does that bother you?”

Her eyes shined with amusement.

“Not necessarily, though I think I’d prefer if you’d just get in the bath with me.”

Harry shrugged, disrobing. He felt no particular need for modesty, given the current arrangement between the two. The smile never left her face as he ventured into the hot bath. She leaned over and kissed him softly, as he allowed the medicated water to soak into the bites covering his upper body. It burned somewhat, but the water worked its magic once again. After a few minutes, the marks were completely healed, and all traces of their existence were wiped clean.

Hitomi rested her head against Harry’s shoulder as he lathered himself. Harry thought, as he had during their walk in the forest the previous day, that it was nice, and rather comfortable. They spent some time in that position, until Harry again felt those soft lips brushing against his ear.

“Grandpa will be awake soon. I need to go downstairs and get breakfast ready.”

Harry glanced out the bathroom window, again noting the terminal darkness of the village.

“How can you tell?”

“Most of us have spend our entire lives in this village, Harry. We can tell the time and season simply by small changes in the air.”

Harry nodded, and made to leave. She stood as well, and placed another kiss on his lips.

“I’ll take that yukata down and give it a wash, Harry. Just take another from the cabinet below.”

With that, Hitomi dressed and headed downstairs, taking Harry’s yukata from the previous day with her. Harry went through the cabinet as she had suggested and decided on a replacement, silver with red fire print. He decided to walk back to his room and read until breakfast.

Rifling through the trunk, Harry had first thought to take out a book on basic Dark Arts, to prepare for his upcoming lesson with Bill. However, he came across another book that grabbed his interest, Basic Precepts of Demonic Magic: A Study of Chaotic Energy, authored by his great-grandfather. Flipping through, he noticed that it was a rather short book, and that it contained no wand motions or spell incantations. Harry briefly considered putting the book down, but decided against it, reasoning that Lord Grindelwald would not have written a useless tome. He turned back to the beginning and began to read.

Much of the book simply repeated what Grilthauk had already told Harry about chaotic energy, and its relation to the ordered energy of the human realm, but in greater detail. Chaos defeated order, and order defeated chaos. Harry remembered what Grilthauk had said about the obliteration of both races if wizards and demons were ever to go to war. Neither side would have any resistance to the attacks of the other. Harry also read that the higher the concentration of one type of energy in a given being’s magical core, the more able that being was to resist attacks of that same type of energy. He thought of what might happen if the likes of a Hogwarts student were to try to stun or hex Dumbledore. The ordered spell would no doubt dissipate before the Headmaster’s mighty aura, doing the old man no harm. The book also stated that this principle only applied marginally to attacks of the opposite type, since the concentration of chaotic energy in the human realm’s magical reservoir was so minute, as was the concentration of ordered energy in the demon realm’s. Harry briefly wondered if he’d be able to kill the likes of Dumbledore or Voldemort simply by blasting them with a concentrated burst of chaotic energy. It was certainly possible, he concluded.

As Harry began to read further, the door to his room opened, and Hitomi stood in the doorway.

“Breakfast is ready, Harry. What are you reading?”

Harry looked up to regard his...friend? Lover, perhaps? He wasn't entirely sure what Hitomi was to him, but he put the thought aside.

“Just a book of my great-grandfather's. Is Kenzo awake?”

“Yes, grandpa's waiting for us in the dining room.”

With that, Harry put the book down, again reminding himself to ask Kenzo for more information about the Shinn Kohaku village. He followed Hitomi down into the dining room, bumping into her as she stopped before the stairs. Turning around, she flashed her unreadable smile again and kissed him, before walking into the next room and taking her seat. Harry followed behind her.

The table was already set upon Harry's arrival, with a most peculiar breakfast dish, especially for a Japanese household. Pancakes, raspberry pancakes, with a large glass of sweetened tea for each. Harry looked right at Hitomi, who flashed him that smile and winked. She knew, and was teasing him. Harry ate and drank ravenously, deciding that two could play that particular game. He finished quickly, and made sure Hitomi was watching as he licked his lips. Once his hosts had finished with breakfast, and Hitomi rose to take the dishes into the kitchen, Harry decided to take advantage of her absence to question Kenzo.

“Kenzo? Do you mind if I ask a question?”

The old village leader turned to him.

“Of course, young lord. Are you asking for Hitomi's hand already, after only one night? She must have made quite an impression.”

Harry blanched slightly. Of course the old man knew, and Hitomi was no doubt aware of the fact. The satisfied smile on Kenzo's face betrayed his happiness with the arrangement, though. Harry couldn't tell why, exactly, but was at least relieved to know that he wasn't

likely to have any outraged Shinn Kohaku trying to castrate him in his sleep. Harry forced a similar smile onto his own face.

“Not at the moment, Kenzo, though the offer is intriguing. I wanted to ask the reason why there seems to be no daylight in this place. I tried to ask Hitomi, but she told me to ask you, and wouldn’t elaborate on the subject.”

The smile fell from Kenzo’s face immediately.

“That, young lord, has to do with our particular curse. Do you know the name of this village?”

Harry had never thought to ask.

“No, I don’t, Kenzo.”

“We call this place, our home, Eternal Shame Village. The name is fitting, as we are eternally shamed by the fact that we failed our mission fifty years ago, to protect Lord Grindelwald, your esteemed ancestor, and assist him in achieving victory over wizarding Britain. He was defeated and killed by Albus Dumbledore, and the war ended in complete and utter loss.”

“And so you are cursed as a result? How is that?”

“It is the law of the Shinn Kohaku clan, young lord, that its operatives are never to return in disgrace. Failure is the greatest disgrace, and is to be redeemed either through continued service to the client until his or her ends have been accomplished or through ritual suicide. After the lord’s death, our original contingent of twenty operatives nearly opted for the latter. Only the persuasion of the goblin general, the character you refer to as Grilthauk, stayed our hands that day. He entreated us to remain here, in this forest, and protect our late lord’s legendary brand, until the day that his descendent would arrive to begin the battle anew. We passed this story onto our children, and then to our grandchildren. Our greatest wish is to return to Japan someday, and to allow our younger ones the privilege of serving the Shinn Kohaku as we older ones had so faithfully. To do this, we will fight for you, and exert our energies to see you to victory, young lord.”

Harry nodded, interested in Kenzo's story. He honestly didn't much care about their plight beyond the realms of his own curiosity, but he still wanted an answer to his original question. He didn't have to ask, though, as Kenzo continued.

"As for the eternal darkness of this forest, I believe it that is simply side effect of the dark energies of the sword. However, it can also be seen as a reflection of our own shame and failure. We view the rising sun as a symbol of glory and rebirth, and to be denied it for so long is a constant reminder of our curse. But now that you have arrived, young lord, perhaps we will soon see the sun rise again, both on our world and on our lives."

Harry smirked slightly, knowing that these Shinn Kohaku would serve him more ably and loyally than any other soldiers. He could certainly find better uses for them than mere guards, though. He'd have to think more upon the subject as time permitted.

"I certainly hope so, Kenzo."

Kenzo bowed slightly.

"As do I, young lord."

A third voice sounded from the far side of the room.

"Quite the story, I have to say."

Both Harry and Kenzo turned to meet the new arrival. Bill stood leaning against the doorway, smirking broadly. Harry nodded to him.

"Bill."

"Ready for training now, Harry? I'll be waiting back in the garden."

With that, Bill strode off to the back of the house, nearly getting bowled over by the two tiger cubs, who had apparently spent the night outside, upon arrival. Harry returned upstairs to retrieve his wand and books and joined Bill in the garden. The cubs attacked him

playfully as well. Harry knew he had forgotten to feed them the previous evening, but they both looked perfectly full and happy, and neither bore any signs of having eaten. Well, as long as they weren't hungry, Harry thought, as he dismissed the issue from his mind and turned to Bill.

The lesson itself was practical and informative, as Harry learned two dozen or so minor, but still useful curses. They weren't anything one would expect to find any degree of success with against a seasoned opponent, as they were very basic and easily countered, as Bill had told Harry. However, many were nasty enough to take down a weak, inexperienced enemy, such as a loud-mouthed student at Hogwarts, and were perfectly legal, though not exactly smiled upon. Further, as Bill explained, just as in any other branch of magic, one had to master the basics in order to move on to the more powerful spells.

Lunch came quickly enough, as Harry and Bill had a quick meal on the grass. Apparently, most of the Order was away from Grimmauld Place during the previous evening by suppertime, as few wanted to stay around after the meeting. As a result, much of dinner had remained uneaten. Bill had grabbed enough for both himself and Harry. If nothing else, Mrs. Weasley's cooking was exquisite, and Harry wolfed his plate down. Bill offered a bit of roast pork to Grindelwald and Khariana, who had spent the entire morning lounging around at Harry's side, but neither seemed interested.

The afternoon hours were spent in practical training, applying the new spells Harry had learned earlier in the morning. Harry needed no special help with the incantations and wand motions, so the lesson passed quickly. Apparently, his dakaathi intellect had uses beyond abstract reasoning. Bill quickly decided that Harry wasn't going to need much help learning new magic, and told him before leaving that the subsequent lessons would be devoted almost entirely to dueling.

The evening found Harry back in his room, finishing the book on demonic magic, or, in more accurate terms, the accumulation of chaotic energy. Apparently, it functioned differently from magic in the human realm, relying on sheer force of will, rather than any particular motion or incantation. However, instead of playing on any particular emotion, such as hate, love, anger or the like, chaotic energy responded to an impassive focus and concentration, at least

according to the book. Harry decided to experiment with the idea a little, and closed his eyes. He focused all of his thoughts upon reaching inwardly for the chaotic energy within his magical core, the power granted by his dakaathi blood. He felt an increasingly warm sensation within his left hand, and opened his eyes to take a look.

His hand was radiating with an aura of translucent black energy, the crystallized blood within the ring glowing with the same eerie light from before his initial transformation in Grilthauk's office. Aiming his hand through his open window toward a small grove of spruce trees behind the house, Harry launched the concentrated energy like he would a spell. It flew forward like a miniature comet, small threads of energy billowing sickly behind and exploded headlong into the grove. Easily a dozen full-sized trees burst into green flames, decomposing into a huge cesspool of glowing rot in a matter of twenty seconds or so. The attack drained Harry's magical reserves completely, sending him crashing to his knees, struggling to remain conscious.

As Harry regained his bearings, he thought back to what he had read. There was almost no chaotic energy within this realm's magical reservoir, meaning that all of that energy had to be drawn from his own magical core. Also, the dakaathi blood was relatively dilute within Harry's veins, meaning that he most likely did not have much chaotic energy within himself to draw upon. As impressive as that attack was, Harry realized that he'd have, at his full power, perhaps two or three shots before he found himself too drained to fight. Definitely a power to be used very sparingly, though the drain wasn't nearly as noticeable when he had held the energy within his hand. He could use chaotic energy to turn his left hook into a literal fist of death, at the very least.

Nearly two hours passed before Harry recovered from the exhaustion. He spent the time reading up on some more advanced dark curses and pondering how to use his resources upon leaving the village. He had come up with a small idea as to how to create that information network that Kenzo had touched upon during their initial meeting, but was distracted from working out the particulars by the arrival of his "other" tutor. Hitomi had crept into the room with a stealthy ease and situated herself right next to Harry. She slipped off her top as their eyes met, and the "training" began without so much as an exchange

of greetings. Nearly four hours of teasing and whispered instruction later, she left the room, but not before giving Harry his first experience with oral sex. He ventured to return the favor, but she just flashed her smile and told him that she'd get the full run of his nether regions before he'd get anywhere near hers. Instructor's privilege, she had called it.

The days in the village passed in similar fashion. Harry would wake up and bathe, sometimes alone, and sometimes with Hitomi, but she always watched, at the very least. Harry found it rather amusing that she always managed to be hanging around right as he went into the bathing room. He was rarely so lucky in catching her, and wasn't about to ask her when she bathed, even though she would have told him. After his bath, he would have breakfast with his two hosts, and Bill would invariably arrive around half past eight, unless he had the scheduled day off work, and was thus expected to be accessible around the clock for Order duty.

Ah, the Order. Just as Bill had predicted, Harry had only spent a few days within the village before the eldest Weasley son came down for the morning with most amusing news. Mad-Eye's turn in the Privet Drive guard rotation had finally come up, and it had taken the grizzled ex-auror roughly one hour to figure out that he had packed up and left, when Hedwig had been let out with a note, and no Harry in the house to have given it to her. Moody had apparated immediately to Grimmauld Place to report, and just as the Order had assembled to discuss the matter, Hedwig arrived with the note. Dumbledore went personally to Privet Drive to interrogate the Dursleys, and when he returned, the old man was, as Bill had described him, "beyond furious". Harry found the entire situation most amusing. Hedwig had been sent to the Burrow, which was all well and good, since she wouldn't have been able to reach Harry in the secluded village anyway.

Still, from the training, Harry managed to become quite the skilled duelist. Bill was slightly more skilled, but Harry's raw power more than made up the difference. Harry was a bit hampered by the fact that he really didn't know his actual magical strength. Even as his body and magical core continued to adjust to the transformation, Harry's holly and phoenix feather wand seemed to do the opposite. He knew that he was more powerful, his increased spellcasting endurance spoke to

that. However, his spells seemed to remain at the same level of strength that they had even before the transformation. Bill had concluded that the problem lay in Harry's wand, that, somehow, it was no longer compatible with him. Harry agreed, but he wasn't sure whether the reason lay in his biological transformation, or in the fact that he no longer identified himself with the false idol known as "Harry Potter". After all, he was now a far cry from the bright-eyed Gryffindor hero that the Ollivander wand had originally chosen. He would have to find a place to obtain a new one.

On those days that Bill wasn't available, Harry spent more time reading his magical tomes, or he solicited training in other areas from various Shinn Kohaku members about the village. After a few such sessions, along with constant practice between, Harry had become surprisingly adept at masking his magical signature from detection and walking about soundlessly. Both skills would potentially prove quite useful in evading Order members and teachers both around Diagon Alley and at Hogwarts, once he left the village.

That last set of skills had proven useful on one occasion already. By a stroke of luck, Harry had managed to catch Hitomi alone in the bath, and was able to creep up behind her unnoticed. She was both surprised and pleased when he managed to grab her naked rear without her being at all aware of his presence, but nearly ruined his favorite yukata by jerking him down fully clothed into the tub with her. Of course, the extra "lesson" that resulted was well worth the price, Harry thought.

Those very lessons were both fulfilling and frustrating for Harry. Oh, he enjoyed all of it, but she never stayed the night with him, and never allowed him to have actual intercourse with her. She seemed to understand his frustration, and tried to ease it somewhat by allowing him to control the pace of their liaisons every other night. He was allowed free reign with her, as long as he stayed within her rules. He tended to use those night to vent, as he bit her more frequently than usual, often hard enough to draw blood, and was rather physical with his handling. Truly, his dakaathi nature did not like to be restrained, and was more than happy to show it when roused. Only Harry's predominant human side, and his increasing fondness for Hitomi, kept him from forcibly taking the beautiful kunoichi. For Hitomi's part,

she had a certain masochistic streak, and Harry's manhandling drove her absolutely wild. It usually took all of her restraint not to break her own rules voluntarily, but she was able to resist the dakaathi charm. She did often remind him, always with her peculiar smile, that while she personally loved playing rough, other women would not, and that he needed to be able to gauge what his partner liked and disliked.

Harry's knowledge and proficiency with the Dark Arts also increased dramatically, and by the end of the month, Harry's repertoire of curses surpassed that of just about any wizard or witch within Voldemort's forces, save for select members of the Inner Circle, and, of course, the Dark Lord himself. That, combined with his honed dueling skills and blossoming dakaathi powers, made Harry quite a force to reckon with. He retained his lack of affinity for the Unforgivables, perhaps due to his somewhat repressed emotional capacities. Of course, he had never tried one with his dakaathi bloodlust truly roused, as that tended to only happen during his most physical outings with Hitomi. He had long deduced that the kunoichi was a bit of a masochist, but he still didn't think she'd appreciate getting belted with the Cruciatus in the middle of a snog. Perhaps he'd show more aptitude for the three curses when placed in the right mindset, but he tended to think of them as a crutch for the unimaginative. He could do better, and his chaotic fist was just as good as an Avada Kedavra, and a whole lot messier besides.

Zharrghast remained situated in its place of rest, on the dais at the far end of Eternal Shame Village. The sentient brand had remained a constant annoyance to Harry, as he remained unable to conceive of any way to take it in hand without risking the loss of his soul to the monster lurking within. Of course, he had little time to ponder the matter, given his other training pursuits. Harry would have enough time to figure out how to deal with Zharrghast upon returning to Hogwarts, an event that he was not particularly looking forward to.

Lastly, Grindelwald and Khariana, Harry's two tiger cubs, continued to grow, and were roughly the size of large muggle dogs, just a bit bigger than Sirius had been in his animagus form, by the end of the month in the village. It seemed that the beasts fed off of their magical link to Harry, siphoning off a small portion of his considerable power in order to sustain themselves. If anything, it was a symbiotic

relationship, as Harry found that he seemed to have a certain empathy with the two creatures, and could command them through sheer force of will. They would thus provide excellent support when the time invariably came to fight, with their lethal claws and teeth and debilitating breath attacks.

And so, Harry awoke, just as he had every morning for the previous month, more or less naked on his futon in the guest room of Kenzo's abode, body riddled with love bites and scratch marks. The latter was a more recent trend, as Hitomi seemed to enjoy paying back his rough handling in kind. This would be his last day in Eternal Shame Village before returning to the wizarding world to face those he had left behind. The Shinn Kohaku had treated him like one of their own and taught him many of their skills, despite the fact that he'd very nearly slaughtered the entire village upon his arrival. Smirking to himself, Harry stalked off towards the bathing room, knowing that Hitomi would likely be right there waiting for him.

He wasn't disappointed, as the young woman was already in the tub, watching the door as if awaiting his presence. He arrived, and shrugged off his yukata with a practiced ease. As he reclined into the wooden tub, she leaned over and kissed him softly, as had become their routine over the course of the month. This time, things were a bit different, though. She responded to his further advances openly and completely, with no underlying teasing or restraint. Harry halted their passionate kissing and regarded her with a raised eyebrow.

"No lesson this time?"

She beamed back at him, a different smile than the one he had come to associate with her almost as if it were an intrinsic part of the collection of quirks and anomalies that he had simply come to know as "Hitomi". This new smile was also free of restraint, and seemed to express everything that she had been holding back for the entire short time that he had known her.

"No, Harry. No more lessons. As of last night, you've graduated from my dojo. There's nothing more about the art of lovemaking for me to teach you."

Lovemaking? Harry preferred to think of it as simply sex, but he'd humor her and use her terminology. He still had one last night to possibly apply his training, after all. He doubted if he'd ever feel completely satisfied unless he took her all the way.

"And yet we've never made love?"

"The sex itself is easy, Harry. Knowing and interpreting the touches and feelings behind it is the difficult part, and you do that masterfully. Yes, I dare say there isn't a woman alive that could resist you now, or that could dominate you in any way."

"But you have, on both fronts."

"Perhaps, but perhaps you simply learned to be a good student. I did have to punish you a few times, though, particularly in the beginning."

Harry didn't have time to continue the debate any further, as Hitomi rose to leave the bath and prepare the morning meal. Harry finished bathing as well, before rising and putting on his favorite of the many yukata he had worn over the course of the month, the white robe with the forest green feathered pattern. Folding his own wings against his body, as had become his habit, Harry gave himself a look in the mirror.

He had physically changed only slightly over the course of the month. His wings had lengthened slightly, to a span of an even eight feet, as had his hair, which now reached to the middle of his back. His muscles were a bit more defined as well, but that was a likely result of his constant training with Bill, as well as Hitomi, who tended to give him a workout in her own right. No, much more defined were the changes in his gait. He carried himself with a nearly feral grace, honed dueling technique and Shinn Kohaku stealth training making his every motion fluid and completely devoid of wasted energy. His eyes, still the same forest green, now bore a hint of ferocity just begging to be unleashed.

Heading down to breakfast, he saw a most peculiar array set before him. Fish, rice, and miso soup, along with, of course, raspberry pancakes. Harry shook his head as he sat down to eat, Kenzo and

Hitomi watching. Grilthauk and Bill were seated at the table as well. Kenzo spoke first, a conspiratorial smile on his face.

“We have enjoyed housing you this past month, young lord. Hitomi in particular, I would imagine, judging by the rackets you two make, but both I and the rest of the village have grown fond of you as well.”

Bill snickered at Hitomi’s horrified face. Grilthauk’s wizened face remained impassive, but the old goblin’s eyes betrayed his amusement. Hitomi chose not to respond, and suddenly became rather interested in her miso soup. Harry supposed that he ought to return the pleasantries, though his thoughts on the matter were in fact somewhat genuine. He rolled his eyes slightly and responded.

“I’ve enjoyed staying here, and I’ve learned more than I ever could have hoped. I honestly don’t want to leave.”

Kenzo nodded.

“But you realize that you must. You have finished recuperating, and I believe that we will all have our own tasks that we must return to as well. Have you given any thought to what you would have us do, young lord?”

Harry decided to follow Kenzo’s lead and unveil his plans for the Shinn Kohaku.

“Yes, you spoke of creating an information network nearly a month ago. My plan would be to have your villagers spread out over the British Isles and open up a network of teahouses in strategic points within select magical areas. The main location should be in Hogsmeade, and branches in Diagon Alley and deep into Knockturn Alley are a must, as are locations in any main wizarding community. Work cooperatively with the goblins on determining exact locations, their client records should help in identifying areas with high densities of magical families. You’ll want to try to create an atmosphere that will attract mostly wealthy pureblooded clientele, since most prominent Death Eaters come from that echelon of wizarding society.”

Grilthauk spoke up.

“And the Order?”

“I don’t think we need to worry about using this network to keep tabs on the Order, since we already have Bill inside, and I can probably bully the old man into letting me in as well. He has too much riding on my participation in his little struggle with Voldemort to deny me much of anything. Back to the main point, the purpose of these places will obviously be to keep eyes and ears fixated onto important locations, and we’ll need each to be connected through some physical network, so that any information uncovered can be relayed quickly, both to Gringotts and to the Hogsmeade head location, from where any special orders will be dispersed. Does this meet with approval?”

Grilthauk and Bill nodded, but Kenzo had a suggestion.

“Perhaps, young lord, it would be better to tailor each location to fit with local needs. For example, we can supply an apothecary in one location, a Japanese robe shop in another, as each is needed, and keep the teahouse as a default for areas where all needs are already met. However, the idea of using businesses as a front for espionage is excellent. Our people are trained in the art of using veiled remarks to loosen tongues. Aside from that, we can make good use of any revenues generated by this venture.”

Bill spoke up now.

“Yes, but where is the initial money going to come from? Building and stocking these places is going to be expensive.”

Harry turned to him.

“Kenzo, I’ll leave that up to your discretion. Bill, I have enough gold just in the Evans vault to buy half of Britain. Combine that with the Potter vault, and the Black vault which is soon to come into my possession. By the way, Grilthauk, we need to set up a time for Sirius’s will reading. We can discuss that tomorrow. Anyway, money is not a concern. Does anybody else have a suggestion?”

Nobody had anything to put forth.

“Then I guess that’ll be all. We’ll get together again in a month or so, before I leave to go back to Hogwarts.”

Grilthauk nodded and left to return to Gringotts, but Bill stayed behind, having nothing else to do with his day. The majority of the day passed without event, but right before supper, Kenzo led Harry outside to a clearing a ways into the forest, Bill and Hitomi following behind. Grindelwald and Khariana noticed them leaving and ran along as well, catching up with Harry easily. The entire village had gathered there to give a farewell feast to the young lord that had restored hope that they would one day be able to return home. The sake bottles went around several times, and Harry felt a bit tipsy by the time the meal had ended.

Harry was presented with a series of gifts from the village. First was a large vial of an invisibility solution, much like the one used in making his father’s cloak. Harry briefly hoped that Tom the Barkeep had kept tabs on his things, particularly that Invisibility Cloak, seeing as he had never showed up at the room he had booked. Harry imagined that the Order had long since scoured the Leaky Cauldron for any sign of him, and took his small bag with them. Dismissing those thoughts, he took a look at the vial before him. The note attached said that one coating of the solution lasted more or less for a week. Harry figured that he could use it to effectively hide his wings, as long as he kept them folded against his body.

The second gift consisted of the entire collection of yukata that Harry had worn over the course of his visit, twelve in all, plus the one he was wearing. He didn’t imagine that he’d be wearing them around Hogwarts, but they were comfortable.

The final gift seemed to be his black dress shoes that had mysteriously disappeared as he bathed that first morning. The villagers explained that they had refit the shoes with softer cushioning, and placed silencing charms onto the soles so that Harry would have less difficulty moving about unnoticed.

After hearing the felicitations of the entire village, Harry left to return to Kenzo’s abode to rest for the evening. He would get none, as it would turn out. Hitomi followed a short distance behind, intent on

sending him off in her own unique way. Harry managed to find his way back quickly enough, and undressed and plopped down onto his futon for the last time. He was nearly asleep when he heard the sound of a silk garment pooling into the floor. He looked up, and there she stood, the flickering lamplight reflecting off of her porcelain skin. Harry thought she had never looked quite so pretty.

“One last lesson, then? And I thought I’d graduated.”

“No lesson, Harry. I want my payment now.”

“Oh? Can I afford your fee?”

She smirked at him, another new expression for her, at least from his eyes.

“Probably not, Harry Evans, but I think that we can come to an arrangement.”

[Content removed]

(End Chapter Six)

Author’s Note: There’s Chapter Six, a bit quicker than I thought I’d be getting it out. Again, I hope I’ve not offended anybody with the sex scene. I’ve made my decision regarding the pairing situation. I will be staying with the multiple partners. For those of you who like Hitomi, she will be getting back in on the action later on, sooner than you think. I like her too much to just kick her out of the plot, and I have a lot of future plans for her. However, she’ll be exiting the stage for a little while, meaning that she won’t be accompanying Harry to school. He needs to be single there for the other pairings to work. I don’t think she’d be really jealous, but how many girls are going to be willing to approach or respond to Harry while Hitomi is constantly shadowing him? Besides, I already have a better way to get her around the area, and many of you will probably be able to guess what it is. I apologize for the fast pace of this chapter, and the summary method used to describe most of Harry’s training. However, I really wanted to get through this arc of the story and back into the canon world. Harry returns to Diagon Alley next chapter.

Whoa, fifty reviews on the nose for this chapter. I'm ecstatic, and thankful for each and every one, but I can't respond individually to that many here or I'd never finish. So, from now on, anybody who has a comment or question about the story that they would like answered, feel free to send me an e-mail, and I'll respond as I'm able. I can also be reached via AIM. You can find the appropriate addresses in my profile. As for the comment about me possibly doing a full-out lemon version and posting it elsewhere, I am certainly considering it. We'll see what develops. Hope you all enjoyed the update, and please keep reading and reviewing, everybody. They're what keep me motivated to continue writing.

Harry slumped down onto the futon next to Hitomi, locking eyes with her. She leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his lips with the last of her energy. She collapsed into a blissful slumber, a reflection of pure ecstasy upon her angelic face. He pulled her close, wrapping his arms and wings around both of them as he followed her into sleep.

Chapter Seven: Return to Diagon Alley – An Indecent Proposal

Harry awoke upon his futon in Kenzo's abode, for what would be his last morning in the village. He intended to leave shortly after breakfast, having made extensive plans for his day. Still, he didn't much feel like moving at that exact moment, as he reveled in the sensation of having a warm body pressed against him. The naked Hitomi felt almost like a natural extension of Harry's own body, especially after they had made love the previous night, though Harry was still reluctant to describe it as such. So beautiful, he thought. A worthy first conquest. He gently threaded his hand through her inky raven hair as his nostrils took in the scent of the room around him. A mixture of drying blood, sweat, a small hint of sake, and the overpowering aroma of female arousal hung in the air, a most delightful combination, Harry thought. Hitomi began to stir within the protective blanket of Harry's wings, soft brown eyes snapping languidly to attention. She looked up at Harry, who continued to unconsciously stroke her hair, and pawed at him gently.

"Harry, you were so wonderful..."

Harry looked over at her, a slightly victorious smirk adorning his face.

"Yes, I imagine so. You weren't so bad yourself, though."

"Care for one last bath, Harry?"

Looking at her as if she had just asked the most ridiculous question in the world, Harry rose, bringing her up with him within the fold of his wings. He reached for the vial of invisibility solution, intending to test it out upon leaving the bath, and grasped his increasingly incompatible wand in the other. Harry used his wings to carry the kunoichi from the room, and lazily aimed his wand at the futon.

“...Scourgify.”

The cleaning charm effectively removed the evidence of the previous night's activities from the hapless futon, but the overpowering odor in the room lingered. For all of Harry's magical study over the course of the past month, basic household charms were left completely out of the curriculum. With a quick glance into Hitomi's amused eyes, he carried her into the bathing room for their final trip as a pair into the wooden tub with the scented water.

Harry and Hitomi reclined in the bath, closing their eyes as the medicated water worked its magic. She held onto him gently, and not a word was exchanged between the pair. None were needed. Once fully healed from the previous night's barbaric sexual exploits and fully cleaned of the olfactory evidence, Harry strode over to the mirror and opened up the vial. He poured a sufficient volume of the stuff at the base of his wings and rubbed it into the dakaathi appendages with a towel, making sure not to allow any to touch his hands or the skin on his back. Harry watched curiously as his wings began to disappear, leaving only a small pair of slits on his upper back where they protruded from his flesh.

Harry asked Hitomi, who watched the scene with growing interest, to take his wand and perform a drying charm on his back, so that the solution wouldn't seep from his wings into his clothing or skin. She complied happily, and Harry wrapped his now invisible wings against his naked upper body. Underneath a robe, nobody would ever be able to tell that they existed, or at least Harry hoped. Reaching into the familiar drawer, Harry found a black formal robe much like the one he had worn into the village, except in much better condition. Once dressed in standard wizard garb for the first time in nearly a month, Harry leaned into Hitomi, who kissed him softly, and the pair started down to breakfast. During the walk, Harry noted with satisfaction that his black dress shoes made no noise against the wooden floor.

Downstairs, they found the table set with a veritable feast. Fresh fruit and fish of all kinds, heaping bowls of miso soup and a large container of hot tea. Kenzo, already seated, spoke as they sat down.

“Most of the villagers assumed that neither one of you would be much up for cooking this morning, judging from the loud noises coming from the house as we all returned home from the gathering. They were kind enough to supply us with this small banquet.”

Neither Harry nor Hitomi elected to respond to that particular statement, only replying to the old Shinn Kohaku leader through a pair of simultaneous nods, which he returned with a smile. Breakfast passed quickly enough, with Hitomi shooting wistful glances at Harry every few minutes. Once the meal was over, Harry went back upstairs and wrapped up his books and the presents from the village, and went to take his leave of Kenzo.

“Well, it’s been great, Kenzo. I hope I’ll be hearing good news soon.”

“We will do our best, young lord. When this is all over, let us gather here once more.”

“Sounds like a plan. We’ll have to think of a new name for this place, though. Eternal Victory Village works for me.”

Kenzo smiled and nodded.

“Indeed. Take care, young lord.”

With that, Kenzo returned to his sitting room. Harry, his carrying bag slung over his shoulder, resumed his departure from the house, only to find Hitomi waiting for him at the front gate. She looked deep into his forest green eyes, a hint of sadness in her brown ones.

“So, this is it, I guess. You’re really leaving, Harry?”

Harry nodded, taking a brief moment to think of a reply.

“Yes, there’s only a month or so left before the start of term, and I still have a lot of business that has to be attended to before I go back to school. Don’t be sad, Hitomi. It doesn’t suit you. We’ll see each other again.”

A smile graced her angelic features.

“Of course we will. Just don’t be too surprised when I climb in through your dormitory window some lonely winter night, Harry.”

“In that case, I’ll be sure to leave it unlocked. Take care of yourself, Hitomi.”

“You too, Harry...”

She leaned in closer to his ear and whispered while slipping a small bag into Harry’s hands.

“Don’t go letting some dark wizard get the better of you, now. The only way you’re allowed to die involves me fucking you to death. Here, think of me every time you drink a cup.”

And, with one last, passionate kiss, Harry’s first real relationship came to an end, at least for the time being. Hitomi headed back into her grandfather’s abode, turning back for just a second to wink at Harry. He looked at the bag in his hands, half guessing its contents. Raspberry flavored tea. Shaking his head with amusement, Harry whistled sharply, causing Grindelwald and Khariana to come bounding up, and the three started down the dark forest path. Along the way, various Shinn Kohaku villagers waved him goodbye, but upon reaching the village exit, an unseen force halted Harry in his tracks, and a familiar, but decidedly unwelcome voice sounded in his head.

“Leaving so soon, my fallen angel? You didn’t even say goodbye. I’m hurt.”

Zharrghast. So he could enter Harry’s consciousness even from a distance. The young part-dakaath had the distinct feeling that this wasn’t a social call. He hadn’t heard so much as a peep from the sentient brand during his entire stay in the village, after all.

“What is it, Zharrghast? I really have no time for this.”

“Hehehehe...you mortals are so very impatient. You have grown much stronger during your short month in this place, my fallen angel.

You have learned even to manipulate the chaos. I see much bloodshed in your near future, and I have reconsidered my earlier decision. This place bores me, especially now that the villagers will soon be leaving as well. I shall accompany you.”

That was not what Harry wanted to hear, and he tried to fight against Zharrghast’s hold on his body. It was impossible, though. The fallen god’s power was simply too great. The sentient brand levitated from the dais over to Harry’s location. His robes opened at the front, moved by the same unseen force that held Harry in position. The blade pressed against Harry’s upper body, hilt at the left of his sternum, blade pointing directly downwards. His body burned hotter than magma as Zharrghast phased into him.

After the blade disappeared into Harry’s body, the pain suddenly stopped, and the force keeping him in place dissipated. He glanced down to see his two tiger guardians whimpering, and the villagers looking at him in shock. Petting Grindelwald and Khariana, Harry assured the villagers that he was fine, and asked a pair of them to inform Kenzo of what they had seen after he had left.

“Hehehehe...shall we go, my fallen angel?”

Harry didn’t dare to respond, as he looked down where the blade had been. He now had a transparent tattoo covering a large portion of the left side of his upper body, a miniature reflection of the sentient brand. The upper portion of the hilt rested just above his sternum, and the tip of the blade was parallel to his navel. He might have even liked it, under different circumstances. He cleared his head as he restarted on his journey to Gringotts, praying that Zharrghast would stay out of his mind and make no attempts to manipulate or control him. Harry refastened his robe as he walked, the tigers following, and found Bill waiting for him at the passageway entrance.

“Morning, Harry. Have a bit of trouble getting out of bed this morning?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. He decided immediately to keep the majority of the new developments with Zharrghast a secret. All talking

about them would do is cause his allies to worry, since there was really nothing any of them could do to remedy the situation.

“And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Merlin, if that poor girl had been screaming any louder, I think she might have cracked Dumbledore’s specs all the way up at Hogwarts. Nice work, by the way, an older girl for your first time. I can just imagine the look on Ron’s face when he finds out.”

“If she makes good on her promises, he’ll get to watch the next time. So, are you my official chaperone for the day?”

Bill pouted in mock indignation.

“Why, Harry, you almost sound as if you don’t want my company. But no, the President just asked me to meet up with you at the forest entrance and escort you back to the lobby. I have to get back to work here in a few minutes. I take it you’re planning on going shopping?”

“That’s the idea. What’s the Order situation up in the Alley?”

Bill shook his head.

“They’re crawling around like ants up there. Dumbledore’s had most of the Order searching for you ever since he learned of your leaving Privet Drive. Your new look will keep them from noticing you for a while, but don’t count on it fooling them for long.”

“Well, I’m hoping I can do most of my shopping outside of the main alley. I know I’m going to have to step into Madame Malkin’s, but I don’t particularly want to go to Ollivander’s for my new wand. I’d rather have one crafted from scratch, one built just for me.”

Bill nodded.

“That’s a good idea. There’s a good wand maker in Knockturn Alley. His shop’s a bit out of the way, though, and I’m sure you know the

types that skulk around back there. Just be careful and keep your scar hidden. You look pureblooded enough with your long hair. Mum's gonna freak when she sees you, by the way. Here, tie your hair back. It's how most of the men from the old families wear theirs, and you'll need to fit in. I'll draw you a map."

Bill took off the band holding his hair in place and gave it to Harry, who fitted his own hair into a long ponytail. Meanwhile, Bill took a piece of parchment and a quill out of the pocket of his robes and scribbled down directions to this wand maker's shop. Harry looked over at him.

"How do you know about illegal wand makers, Bill?"

"I was on patrol with Mundungus once, and he dragged me over to the place. He had some shady business or the other with this guy, and needed another wand on his side in case things got nasty. I took a look around, the guy does great work, and uses powerful magical focuses and base materials that Ollivander doesn't deal in for fear that he'd lose his contract with Hogwarts. He can even carve your wand into a custom design. It's a mostly aesthetic touch, but it can enhance the performance in some cases. I wanted to have a second wand done there myself, but his work's really expensive, and I don't think the Order would take kindly to my doing business in Knockturn Alley."

"What's his name?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't even get a good look at him. He ushered 'Dung into the back of the shop and left me in the lobby. You'll just have to deal with him when you get there."

Harry took the directions from Bill and started back to the Gringotts main lobby. They continued to talk as they walked.

"Well, I was considering a trip to Flourish and Blotts, but I don't think I'm going to go, given the Order presence in the main alley. It's not like they can force me to go to Grimmauld or back to Privet Drive, given my adult status, but it's just too much of a hassle."

“What did you want to get?”

“Mostly a book on old pureblooded by-laws and such. It’d be handy to know that stuff the next time I have a spat with the Ministry or Dumbledore. I was also thinking of maybe picking up a book of auror spells, just in case I ever have to fight in front of a bunch of witnesses. I daresay that getting chunked into Azkaban for using Dark Arts would hamper my plans a bit.”

Bill chuckled softly.

“I doubt Azkaban could even hold you, Harry. Anyway, if I might venture a suggestion?”

“Go ahead.”

“Maybe you should have some armor forged for yourself. Mostly a breastplate to go under your robes, and a pair of gauntlets. Maybe some leg armor also, but I noticed that you had some issues with taking spells during our dueling practices. You seemed a lot worse off after taking basic spells than you should have been, and I’m not all that powerful magically, at least compared to a Dumbledore.”

Harry winced inwardly. He’d been hoping that Bill wouldn’t have picked up on that. He had soaked in the medicated water at Kenzo’s abode on much more than one occasion after suffering severe bruising from one of Bill’s stunners, and even serious internal bleeding once when Harry had been caught with a reflected bludgeoning hex of his own. He figured that the chaotic energy in his blood was the cause, as it rendered him weaker against ordered magic. Still, the armor was a good idea. Maybe he would have a use for that arkanite, after all.

“Do you know of any decent armor smiths, then?”

“Yeah, Ts’ao Chang, in Liangshan Alley. He’s probably the best magical blacksmith this side of Germany. Gringotts has sent me over to his forge on several occasions with requests. He does a lot of the larger projects for the goblin clans.”

At this point, they arrived at the main lobby. Harry was so absorbed in his conversation with Bill that he didn't notice Grilthauk coming over to greet him.

"Liangshan Alley? I've never heard of it."

Grilthauk made his presence known by interjecting himself into the conversation.

"I doubt you would have, Harry. Liangshan Alley is the hub of the magical Chinese population of Britain. Many of the older, more traditional families live there. They have a very strict isolationist policy, and most of them prefer not to associate with other aspects of wizarding society on any personal level, aside from occasionally sending their children to Hogwarts for schooling. I assume that you have reason to have some work done by Master Ts'ao Chang?"

Harry turned to the old goblin and regarded him with a cautious expression.

"Why do you assume that?"

"There is no other reason for you to require a visit to Liangshan Alley. Any other need could be fulfilled just as easily elsewhere. The main entrance to the alley is along the left wall of this building, but it is sealed to all except those who live there and those who have special permission to enter. Gringotts has a contract with Master Chang, and thus any person with an official missive from myself can enter, but it has to be stamped with the special seal given to the bank by the alley's elected prefect. I can prepare such a missive for you, but it will take some time. I would suggest finishing your business in the other alleys for now, and returning here later for your passport into Liangshan Alley. Here, I have prepared your shopping expenses for the day. This bag is magically lightened and enlarged, and holds a sum of twenty thousand galleons. I doubt that you could possibly spend that much."

Harry nodded and took the bag, fastening it to his waist.

“I’d appreciate that, Grilthauk. Bill, thanks for the advice. I think I’ll go pay a visit to that wand maker, and then go to the clothier. I’ll be back by in a few hours.”

Bill smiled back at him.

“Watch yourself in Knockturn Alley, Harry. Not that I think anybody will dare to mess with you, especially with those two huge cats flanking you.”

Harry left with a nonchalant wave, Grindelwald and Khariana following quickly behind. He stalked right past Hestia Jones, the Order member posted at the bank entrance, without drawing any particular attention. The older woman’s eyes lingered appreciatively on the young dakaathi hybrid for a moment, but Harry knew that it had nothing at all to do with his identity. Bah, she was old enough to be his mother and not particularly attractive besides. Keep dreaming, sweetheart, Harry mentally sneered.

He reached the entrance to Knockturn Alley quickly enough, and walked in after a split second of hesitation. The place was as filthy and decadent as Harry had remembered from before his second year. Dirty hags shuffled about here and there, selling the most disgusting of items on the pathway. A gaudily dressed woman, noticing the attractive Harry, as well as the pouch of gold at his waist, sauntered over to him in what she believed to be a sensual manner. Harry was positively revolted, but a snarl from Khariana sent her running back into the brothel behind her. He laughed to himself, less than surprised that prostitution was a big business in this cesspool of wizarding filth, with oily toads like Draco Malfoy swaggering about, desperate for any sex they can get.

Speak of the devil, Harry mused. In a side alley, speaking in hushed tones with a group of wizards that Harry assumed had to be Death Eaters, was the worthless heir to the house of bad faith. He inwardly prayed that Draco had taken the Dark Mark, as it would give Harry a valid excuse to beat the living shit out of him at school, and then have him tossed in Azkaban. But, for the moment, Harry just ignored his pretended rival. He took out Bill’s directions and followed them. As the eldest Weasley son had said, Harry’s destination was well off the beaten path, taking him into back alleys that he would not have even

seen had they not been marked on the makeshift map. Upon reaching the end of the path, he found himself in front of a small, dusty shop, with windows so grimy that he couldn't even begin to see in. Sighing, he opened the wooden door and strode in, hoping that he hadn't wasted his time.

As soon as Harry entered the shop, a red jet of light flew at him from the back room, strong enough to indicate that it belonged to a wizard or witch of considerable strength and skill. Harry rolled forward to avoid the stunner, and his two tiger guardians leapt into a protective formation in front of him, growling dangerously. The beam impacted with the door frame, causing it to splinter. Harry drew his original wand as a figure stepped out from the same back room.

"Those are some good reflexes you got there, boy."

Harry's expression was stony, ice dripping from his response.

"I try. I hear from a friend that you design wands of high quality. I have come hoping to have one crafted."

The man stepped into the light. He was older, perhaps in his fifties, and looked to be of Hispanic descent. He took in Harry's appearance with nearly tangible disdain.

"Yeah? Well, I don't do work for little pureblooded elitist Death Eater snots. Get out of here, boy, before I get serious with you."

"And what, pray tell, makes you so certain that I serve Voldemort?"

A slight hint of respect crossed the wizard's face, before it contorted back into that same hateful scowl.

"Not many can say his name, boy. Still, you look every bit the little Death Eater bastard, with your long hair and fancy robes. And even if you're not, then you have to be in line with that idiot Minister or that old muggle-loving fool. I don't do work for their people either. Now get out."

Harry was amused by this point, and couldn't keep the cold venom in his tone.

"Yes, and that would explain why your shop is situated here in the middle of nowhere, and, by the looks of things, hasn't done any business in years. Tell me, old man, whom DO you deign to make wands for? By the way, you're wrong on all three counts. I hate Voldemort, I despise Fudge, and I can't stand Dumbledore either."

The spiteful look never left the shopkeeper's face.

"What do you think of Voldemort, boy?"

Harry shrugged.

"I think he's a nothing more than a glorified terrorist, and a hypocrite besides. He claims to advocate pureblooded supremacy, but he himself is a half blood, and he attacks even those of pure stock that manage to see the faulty logic behind his madness. He has no plan for the future, and is rather tactically inept. The forces of the "light" are making no serious effort to prosecute the war, and yet he still fails to achieve victory."

The shopkeeper nodded in agreement.

"And the other two?"

"Fudge and his Ministry are corrupt beyond salvation. Good people are held down by intrigue, bribery and misappropriation run rampant. Fudge and those around him are useless bigots, and control the media in order to string the general public along and cajole them into agreeing with their prejudicial ideas. As for Dumbledore, his intentions are pure enough, but he is an incapable, as evidenced by his colossal failures in managing the resistance during both of Voldemort's campaigns. He claims to be our world's protector, and yet it continues on a downward spiral. He is either unable or unwilling to take steps against it, and refuses to step aside and allow those with true vision and ability to lead our world into the future."

“Impressive. Perhaps I misjudged you. Now, for whom you fight, boy?”

Harry stared hard into the shopkeeper's eyes, and understood. This was a man that he could speak to with absolute candor, one that was ready and willing to hear the truth of what Harry once was, and what he has now become. Besides, he could always just kill the old codger if things spiraled out of control.

“I fight for myself, and for those of the new generation that would wrench control of our world from these decadent relics of the past, the Ministry and Dumbledore. I fight for those who have been slighted by the bigotry and corruption of wizarding society at large. I am a leader, old man, and not a follower. I am the being formerly known as Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. I am Harry Alphonse Evans, blood heir of the Great Grindelwald, prince of the dakaath, and the next ruler of our world. Now, does that satisfy you?”

The shopkeeper stared long and hard at Harry, and his face split into a broad grin.

“Well I'll be damned, Grindelwald's heir has risen. And I can feel the burning resolve within your soul, even though your face says nothing. Finally, somebody with true vision and purpose. Somebody worthy of holding one of my creations. I'll craft you a wand, boy. Come into the back room with me.”

Harry strode along behind the old shopkeeper, with a noble bearing and a seasoned dueler's gait. He found himself in a much different room than the lobby. While dark, it was finely furnished, with odd magical substances placed about in an orderly fashion. The shopkeeper was placing various large cuts of wood on a long table on the far end of the room.

“Well, this is a welcome change of venue, as it were.”

The shopkeeper smirked at Harry.

“First, we'll need to choose your wood. Just come over here and touch each of these. The one that gives the most tangible reaction to your magical essence is the wood we'll use for your wand.”

"First, may I ask your name, sir?"

The shopkeeper nodded.

"The name's Alberto Rodriguez. I was an auror before getting into the wand business."

Well, that was interesting, Harry thought. Voldemort he could understand, but why would a former auror dislike the Ministry, or Dumbledore? Putting the thought aside, he complied with Alberto's instructions. Harry quickly noted that none of these woods were of the conventional variety. One seemed to have the texture of stone, another was seeping blood, and a sample in a far corner of the table seemed to radiate with an odd aura. These showed varying levels of response to Harry's essence, but one, a material that had the consistency of living tissue, colored the same forest green as Harry's eyes and wings, shined with an aura of magical energy upon his touch, and began to pulse in a manner consistent with a human heart. Alberto had a look of pure glee upon his face. Harry turned to him.

"What is this, Alberto?"

"That, boy, is a material that I would never have thought to have found a compatible wizard. It is the living magical essence of an elder treant, a substance of immense potential. This will no doubt be the most powerful wand that I have ever crafted. Now, we need to choose the materials to fuse into the wand's core. Most wand crafters, Ollivander, for example, use only one, but I employ two. Think, boy, of two items that you would most associate with the core of your being, of your very existence."

Harry did so, and a tentative answer came to him quickly. He reached inside his robes and felt around for his wings. He plucked two feathers from his own body, and lay them on the counter. Of course, they were still invisible from the earlier treatment. He looked to Alberto.

"Can you undo the effects of an invisibility solution?"

The old shopkeeper nodded, pulling out his own wand. He aimed where Harry had placed his hand upon the counter.

“Reverso Invicium!”

The two forest-colored feathers appeared on the counter, as Alberto looked to Harry.

“What are these?”

“Feathers, from my own body. It’s difficult to explain, but they contain the core symbolism of my dakaathi heritage.”

“Dakaathi? What in Morganna’s name is that supposed to mean, boy?”

“Don’t worry about it. Will they work?”

“They ought to, if they come from your own body. Now, as these come from a living body, they should be suspended in a blood medium, in order to maximize their effect. Using your own blood would be pointless, as that would just be the exact same magical essence, and there would be no reaction between the two components. Tell me, boy, what are those two pets of yours?”

Harry glanced back at the door, seeing Grindelwald and Khariana standing there at attention.

“Magical breeds of tiger, a Bengal and a Siberian White. I hatched them from containment eggs in my family’s vault, and they’re magically bonded to me.”

Alberto nodded again, grabbing a long needle and a small vial from the table.

“They ought to do perfectly, then. I’d like to take a small blood sample from each. Their magic is bonded to yours, but the essence is different. This also means that your wand will have three core materials: the feathers, and two different blood mediums. It’s rare that I can craft that many into a single wand, boy.”

“You’d better let me do it. They’re liable to attack if you get too close.”

Taking the two items from Alberto, Harry walked over to his two pets. They seemed to sense what he needed, as both offered up a front paw without any hesitation. He gently extracted an equal amount of blood from each, enough to fill the vial. The blood seemed to glow as the two samples mixed. He brought the vial back over to Alberto and set it down next to the feathers.

“Excellent, now, the next step is to shape the wood. Focus your magic and touch the treant core. It will carve itself into the shape best suited to you.”

Harry did so, deciding to use his left hand. He focused a small amount of chaotic energy into his hand, just enough to resonate with the material, but not to be overtly toxic to the living magical tissue. Resting his hand slightly on the treant core, he could feel it begin to vibrate and change form beneath him. While waiting, he decided to prod Alberto for more personal information.

“I’ve trusted you with my story, so tell me yours. How does an auror come into the wand business?”

Alberto cast his eyes downward, and had pure fury in his eyes as he looked back to Harry.

“I was a part of an elite unit headed up by Alastor Moody during Voldemort’s first rising. Unlike him, I was never known for kinder methods of apprehension. Yes, boy, I used the Dark Arts liberally, fighting fuego con fuego. Comprende? Moody always mistrusted me for that, and interceded on more than one occasion to prevent my getting promoted to auror captain, despite the fact that my capture rate was second only to his own.”

Harry nodded. Simple jealousy, he thought.

“One day, while I was off on a raid, a small crack unit of Death Eaters, headed up by Lucius Malfoy, attacked my home, killing my wife and two daughters. I came home, found my house burning with the Dark

Mark in the air. I rushed to try and save my family, to see that piece of shit Malfoy raping my eleven year old daughter's dead body, while his cronies chuckled in the background..."

Harry mentally added another bullet point to his short list of reasons to torture Lucius Malfoy into insanity, but kept his face impassive as he continued to listen.

"I tracked them down, boy, and I killed every last one of them, save for Malfoy. That slippery bastard escaped. Moody and my other squadmates arrived at the scene, and I went after Malfoy, expecting them to follow. As soon as I turned my back, that son of a bitch Moody stunned me. I was hauled before an internal tribunal, raked over the coals for letting my personal feelings interfere with my duty, and kicked off the force. They even had the gall to claim that they showed me mercy by not sentencing me to Azkaban for the murder of five wizards. I hate them all, boy. I hate Voldemort for taking away my family. I hate the Ministry for turning its back on me. And I hate Dumbledore for allowing people like Voldemort and Malfoy to exist, despite being the most powerful wizard alive, as well as our world's supposed protector. Bah! That's why I refuse to craft wands for any of their people."

"And how exactly did you get into this business, then?"

"Not much to say. My family has been crafting wands back in Mexico for generations. I learned the trade growing up. After I was kicked off the force, and my first wand snapped, I took the little money I had saved, that was supposed to be for my little girls' Hogwarts education, and invested it in this little shop, secluded away from the scum that I despise so much. When my father died, I inherited most of his rare materials, including the treant core that your wand is being crafted from. Speaking of which, it should be finished now."

Harry looked down, to see a true work of art resting beneath his hands, still of the same forest green color, roughly seventeen inches in length. The wand bore the standard form, but had a carved serpentine dragon coiling around the shaft, its fanged mouth wide open and pointing in the same direction as the tip. The creature's wings flared out to either side of its body. Below the dragon, the wand

has an ornately carved handle, comfortable to the touch, capable of producing a much stronger grip than the standard Ollivander variety. Harry's old wand looked like a child's toy compared to this masterpiece. As he admired it, the coiled dragon fidgeted slightly. The treant core seemingly had retained its living qualities.

"Its mouth is open. Does that mean anything, Alberto?"

The former auror nodded in amazement, while reaching into a cabinet and producing a large array of different stones. Setting the array before Harry, he spoke.

"Apparently, this wand desires a discharge stone. These are rare foci that amplify a spell's magical potential as it fires from the core. This wand is going to be like no other, boy. Now, come here and concentrate your magic again. The proper stone will levitate into the air."

Harry again complied, wondering just how long crafting his new wand would take. Two stones levitated into the air, rather than just one. The first was a radiant gold, and seemed to glow as bright as the sun. The second was a mercurial silver, and emitted a faint light of its own. Both shattered into crystal, and recombined into a single stone that bore a heterogeneous mixture of both. Alberto attempted to explain.

"A sunstone and a moonstone...two opposing elements combined into one focus. I wouldn't have thought this possible, boy. This bears some portent, though I know not what it is. No matter, let's get this wand put together."

Alberto brought the element together, first pouring the mixture of Grindelwald and Khariana's blood into the hollow shaft, and then pushing Harry's feathers down into the chute. The shaft sealed by itself, evidence of the treant core's living properties. Finally, the dragon's mouth upon a bit wider, allowing Alberto to fit the composite stone into place. The result was magnificent. Harry could feel pure magical power surging through every fiber of his being as he held it. This was the true strength brought upon by his transformation. He turned to Alberto appreciatively.

“Excellent work, Alberto. How much is this going to cost me?”

“Keep your money, boy. You can pay me another way.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“You’re serious about fixing the problems plaguing our world. Let me join you. I can assure you that this old body still has a bit of fire left in it. I’ve been sitting idle here, sulking over my fate, for much too long now. It’s time for me to get my revenge, both on Malfoy, and on Moody and the Ministry.”

Harry considered the proposal. Alberto Rodriguez was a wand maker of great skill, and was a trainer auror and a formidable wizard besides. He would prove exceedingly useful. The answer was obvious. Harry extended his hand.

“Very well, welcome aboard.”

Alberto shook Harry’s hand.

“It’s a pleasure. I’ll need some time to prepare to leave this place. Where can I go once I’m ready?”

“Just go over to Gringotts and ask for Bill Weasley, and if he’s not there, tell the attendant that Lord Evans has sent you to speak with the President. Either one will tell you what you can do from there. Now, I have other business to attend to, so I’ll be taking my leave. Thank you again for this masterpiece.”

“It was your own magical essence that created it. I just put it together. Vaya con Dios, Harry.”

Harry nodded and left Alberto’s shop, Grindelwald and Khariana training behind, confident at having secured yet another powerful ally. The next destination was Madame Malkin’s, to order new school robes, as well as formal and battle wear. The trip from Knockturn Alley was uneventful. Draco had long since gone his merry way, and the street hags were far too terrified of Harry’s feral mannerisms, as well as the two tigers snarling maliciously on his flanks, to dare

approach him. He reached the clothier in a matter of a few minutes, and motioned to Grindelwald and Khariana to wait for him outside the entrance. Hoping that the irritating saleswitch from his last visit wasn't in the shop this time, he strode in, exposing his scar as he did so. He didn't particularly care to expose himself, but he knew that he would get priority service at the place based on his celebrity, and he really wanted to get his shopping finished. Madame Malkin herself was operating the shop this time, and Harry walked right up to the counter, bracing himself for the coming irritation of having to answer to the name "Potter". Forcing an affable smile onto his face, despite having a serious urge to scowl, Harry addressed the proprietor.

"Good afternoon, Madame Malkin. I was hoping to perhaps purchase some new robes?"

The woman turned to face him.

"Bless my soul, Harry Potter! Where have you been, young man? Half the wizarding world has been searching day and night for you! Give me a moment to floo the Headmaster."

Not good, Harry thought. He should have known that showing his face in the main alley was a mistake. He had to act quickly.

"Please, you needn't bother. I'm taking the Knight Bus over to Hogsmeade as soon as I'm done here. I just need to get my shopping done first, and this is my last stop."

She looked at him skeptically, but relented at the innocent look on his face.

"Very well, then. What can I do for you today, Harry?"

"I mostly need school robes, but I'd also like a set of formal dress robes, and, perhaps most importantly, a set of battle robes. Can't be too careful these days, you know. I'll have the Hogwarts and dress robes done in the finest silks you have available, and likewise on the dragon hide for the battle robes. Money is of no concern."

“Acromantula silk is quite expensive, Harry. Only the wealthiest families tend to purchase it, but if you say so, I’ll have them made. As for your battle robes, we’ve recently received a shipment of black basilisk hide from the swamps of South America, if you’d be interested in an alternative to dragon hide.”

“How is it for spell resistance?”

“On par with most types of dragon hide, but it’s also lighter and allows for greater flexibility. We have just enough for two good sets of robes.”

Harry nodded.

“I’ll take them both.”

Madame Malkin gasped slightly, but motioned for Harry to come back to the fitting room. As he followed, another customer walked into the shop, glancing around disdainfully.

Narcissa Malfoy was not having a good summer. First, her husband had somehow managed to botch a raid on the Ministry of Magic in the Dark Lord’s name, and was subsequently carted off to Azkaban, much to her public mortification. Privately, she might have been pleased at being freed from Lucius’s tyrannical rule and tight limits on her spending, but unfortunately, his imprisonment automatically established Draco as lord of the manor, emancipating him and placing him in charge of the family’s finances. Her useless son seemed to take vindictive pleasure in denying his mother a spending stipend, and she was not going to lower herself to asking him for money.

And that wasn’t the worst of her problems. She could tolerate not being allowed to spend liberally. After all, she had suffered it for years with her husband. However, just as soon as Draco had come into the inheritance, the Dark Lord had ordered him to take the Dark Mark, and serve in his father’s stead. Now, she was forced to suffer her son’s constant prattling about his schemes to destroy “bloody Saint Potter” in his master’s name, as if the boy were actually capable of devising and executing a plan beyond dirty Quidditch tactics. Draco had also taken to spending heavily, particularly in financing the Dark

Lord's fruitless operations. He was running through the Malfoy fortunes faster than a Niffler in heat, and the family would be bankrupt within the year unless something was done.

And, the final irritation, Narcissa's automatic monthly stipend from her own family's fortunes, the one that she had received without fail ever since reaching her majority, was suspended with her cousin's death, pending the approval of the new Lord Black. Bloody crazy bitch, Bellatrix. She just couldn't stop herself. Narcissa barely recognized her insane sister as being family anymore, and avoided her as much as possible. This was becoming increasingly difficult, since the woman had taken to visiting Malfoy Manor much more frequently, after both Lucius and her own husband had been sent to Azkaban. Narcissa couldn't borrow money from Bellatrix, either, since the Ministry had confiscated the Lestrange fortunes in full after their original sentencing to Azkaban, and she was a wanted fugitive besides. Narcissa wondered who the new Lord Black could be. It wasn't Draco, she would have known about that in a matter of minutes, given the brat's willingness to boast. She had a sinking feeling that it would be Harry Potter, the boy that her cousin Sirius had looked upon as a surrogate son. It would be a cold day in Hades before Potter would condescend to alleviate the plight of his school rival's mother.

And speak of the devil, stalking out from the fitting room, scar exposed for the world to see, was the golden boy himself. He calmly took a seat on the waiting room sofa, leaving a good distance between himself and Narcissa. She gave the boy who was verily the bane of her only son's existence an appraising look. He was a far cry from being the grubby, bespectacled urchin that Draco had so often drawled on about, and certainly looked nothing like the scrawny little boy she had vaguely recalled from the Quidditch World Cup a few years back. He was reasonably tall and quite well dressed, and his long hair was tied back in proper wizarding fashion. Further, he carried himself with a certain bearing, dignified, but with an underlying hint of ferocity, one that reflected within his forest green eyes. His gait exhibited the feral grace of a trained duelist, much like her husband's. She felt a pang of worry for Draco, knowing that her son was not likely to survive an encounter with this young man. Oh, yes, if not for the fact that he was Harry Potter, Narcissa would have found him

irresistably attractive. Her eyes strayed to the ring adorning his left hand. No, that was impossible. His mother had borne the name Evans, but she was a mudblood. Her thoughts were interrupted as his head snapped over to her, and he regarded her with a neutral tone.

“May I help you, Mrs. Malfoy?”

She returned his gaze haughtily.

“No, Potter. I was simply admiring the ring on your finger. You are aware of its significance, I hope?”

His eyes sparkled with hidden amusement. He wasn't in the least intimidated or offended by her presence. Both facts surprised Narcissa.

“It is my maternal great-grandfather's wedding band, a gift from a foreign princess. I suppose it could also be taken to signify the lordship of the Evans family, though I know not if it is, in fact, the official legacy ring. What surprises me, Mrs. Malfoy, is that you recognize it. It hasn't been worn in fifty years, and there hasn't been an active head of the family in well over a century. After all, Lord Grindelwald hardly placed much emphasis upon his social and political obligations.”

“True, most would not recognize that ring, nor would they connect it to the Evans family. Lord Grindelwald performed quite remarkably in keeping the social stigma of his name away from his ancestral line. As for myself, I have always taken a personal interest in the genealogy of the old wizarding families. Consider it a hobby of mine. However, I am curious as to how you have come into the lordship. Your mother bore the name Evans, but she was of common muggle stock. Could you explain for me?”

“From what I have been told, Grindelwald fathered an heir in the later years of his life. The boy was a squib, and on the last night before his final defeat at the hands of Professor Dumbledore, Grindelwald instructed his most trusted general to hide his son within the muggle world, safe from any potential threats posed by post-war purges. He married and sired my mother, who in turn bore me. My mother was

heiress to one of the oldest lines, though she never even had a clue. The President of Gringotts has held the ring in trust for the last half century, and summoned me personally to claim my inheritance roughly a month ago.”

The President of Gringotts? The President never met with wizard clientele. Lucius had requested meetings with the head goblin on several occasions, only to be curtly denied. Not even the Minister of Magic could meet with him. If Potter was telling the truth, if he had a direct link to the head of the bank hierarchy, then perhaps...

“The President of Gringotts? Is he a friend of yours, Pott...”

Harry’s eyes narrowed a bit. He knew that she was up to something. Narcissa realized that he wasn’t going to be lured in by veiled questions.

“Evans. I’ve decided to adopt my mother’s maiden name, since I am, after all, the active head of the family. And as for your question, yes. President Grilthauk and I have come onto rather amicable terms. Why do you ask?”

Narcissa decided to take a risk. It certainly seemed that Potter, or Evans, could be the answer to all of her difficulties. If he had the ear of the President, then he could easily have Draco supplanted as the controller of the Malfoy finances in her favor, or at least have a limit placed upon the boy’s spending, and a sizable stipend placed into a private vault for Narcissa’s personal use. The only issue was how to induce him to cooperate. She couldn’t offer him money, as she had none at the moment, and he had no need for it anyway. She remembered exactly why she had come to this shop.

Narcissa had originally come to Madame Malkin’s in order to use the last of her gold to purchase a rather provocative dress, and proceed to pay a visit to one of wizarding Britain’s wealthiest private financiers in order to procure a short-term loan. Anton Borgia was an absolute pig of a man, and Narcissa was fully aware of what she would have had to do in order to procure a loan, and of the probable terms of repayment. The fat, greasy swine would have taken great vindictive

pleasure in making the pureblooded society queen gratify his perverted whims.

Now, the angle had changed. She was certain that she could use her feminine wiles in order to procure the young lord's assistance, and he seemed to be honorable enough to let one night be the end of it. Besides, he was certainly handsome, even more so than Lucius had been in his youth, and she could work with his probable inexperience. Steeling herself, she looked right into his forest green eyes, but not before glancing towards the back to make certain that Madame Malkin wasn't approaching.

"I ask, Mr. Evans, because I have a certain set of issues, and I now believe that you could be instrumental in assisting me in their resolution. Perhaps you might be willing to join me for a cup of tea, so that we can further discuss the matter? I am fully willing and able to compensate you, if you require."

Most boys would have blushed or stuttered at such a direct proposal, but Harry didn't so much as flinch. He simply quirked an eyebrow and responded in a slightly lower tone of voice, one that carried equal hints of seduction and amusement.

"Are you propositioning me, Mrs. Malfoy? While I'm more than interested in listening to exactly what your offer might be, it doesn't do to discuss such business in public places. Who knows what ears might be listening in? Perhaps a private meeting would be more suitable..."

"Perhaps you are correct. As it happens, I have a certain location in mind. Allow me to supply you with directions."

Narcissa reached into her handbag, pulling out a customized quill and a small piece of parchment. As she wrote, Madame Malkin returned from the fitting room, having completed the physical plans for Harry's robes.

Harry stood, and walked over to the counter to meet the store proprietor and pay his bill.

“Your bill comes to nine thousand, seven hundred and twenty three galleons, that is for all of the robes, and the delivery fee. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Potter. Shall I have the robes sent to Hogwarts?”

Harry chuckled softly at Narcissa Malfoy’s incredulous gasp from behind him when Madame Malkin gave the purchase price.

“No, I’ll come for them personally in a week or so. They are not to be surrendered to any other party, regardless of what they may say. I trust they’ll be prepared by then? Don’t bother adjusting the price, I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

Madam Malkin nodded, albeit a bit confused. Harry paid the appropriate amount, and turned to leave. Narcissa brushed past him as he walked smoothly towards the exit, slipping the folded parchment into his right hand. He left the store, whistled for Grindelwald and Khariana, and started down the street, reading the note. It was nothing complicated, just instructions to floo to a certain room at the Hotel Verdant in Watercress Alley at ten o’clock sharp that evening. He shook his head slightly at the last part, at Narcissa dictating the time down to the second, as if the woman were doing him some huge favor by spreading her legs for him. He immediately resolved to be at least fifteen minutes or so late for their liaison, if only to show her who exactly was in control. Harry wasn’t sure what exactly Draco’s mother wanted from him, though he assumed it involved using his connection with Grilthauk for her advantage somehow. He fully intended to turn her manipulations against her. For now, though, he needed to return to Gringotts, and get his ticket into Liangshan Alley in order to meet with Master Ts’ao Chang.

However, Harry’s preoccupation with Narcissa Malfoy had caused him to make a critical error. He had forgotten to cover up his scar again upon leaving the clothier...

(End Chapter Seven)

Author’s Note: I was hoping to get this one out late last night, but I just became too exhausted to finish. So, I simply decided to give you readers a slightly longer chapter instead. I had originally wanted to

finish this chapter with a Harry/Narcissa sex scene, but I decided that two straight trysts to end chapters was enough. It'll be in the next one, for certain, as will be Harry's meeting with the master smith in Liangshan Alley, and his initial confrontation with the Order of the Phoenix. Hopefully I can get things back to Hogwarts by chapter ten or eleven, but again, I prefer to keep the pace from getting too rapid. Just remember that everything that I'm doing in these slow paced chapters will come into play more later on. I particularly hope you readers liked Rodriguez, and Harry's new wand. Both will have very important roles in the plot later in the story.

Thanks for all the reviews, and I hope you enjoy this chapter as well. Keep reviewing, folks. I always enjoy reading them.

However, Harry's preoccupation with Narcissa Malfoy had caused him to make a critical error. He had forgotten to cover up his scar again upon leaving the clothier...

Chapter Eight: Into Liangshan Alley – Solar Princess

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry strode back towards Gringotts, completely ignorant of the fact that his infamous scar was exposed. He drew a few stares as he walked, Grindelwald and Khariana following proudly, but dismissed them as reactions to either his own looks, or the two exotic pets that accompanied him. He reached the bank entrance in no time, striding past the Order member at the entrance without thinking, and met Bill near the back of the lobby. The eldest Weasley son stared right at his forehead.

"Harry...your scar."

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

"What about my...oh, shit. Well, I guess it's too late to do anything about it now. Is my passport ready yet, Bill?"

"Yeah, one of the goblins just went up to the President's office to get it. So, did you visit that wand maker?"

"Yeah, here, take a look."

Harry fluidly whipped his new wand out from the waistband of his robes and handed to Bill, who admired it and whistled appreciatively.

"Damn, that's quite a piece of work, Harry. If it's even half as powerful as it looks, I really pity whichever Order member tries to haul you off to Dumbledore. Maybe I ought to ask this guy to make me a wand after all."

Harry smirked slightly, hoping that if anybody were to accost him out in the alley, it would be Snape. He certainly wouldn't have any

compunction about blasting that particular greasy bastard well into next week. He briefly thought of what spell to use as he took his new wand back from Bill.

"You'll get your chance. Turns out that he harbors as much hatred for both the establishment and Voldemort as the rest of us. He listened to my story and asked to join up in lieu of monetary payment. He's a pretty powerful wizard, former auror during the first rising before getting end to the wand business. We should be able to find a lot of uses for him. Anyway, he should be coming in here in the next day or so, after he finishes packing up his shop. I told him to ask for you, so kindly escort him up to Grilthauk's office when he arrives."

"Sure, what's his name?"

"Alberto Rodriguez."

"Rodriguez? I remember hearing about him, I think. Something about him killing a whole bunch of Death Eaters in retaliation for an attack on his family. The whole thing went down a few years before I was born. Dad was part of the internal inquiry council the Ministry put together to hear the case."

"Yeah, that's him..."

At this point, a goblin arrived with Harry's passport, which he took with an appreciative nod before continuing his conversation with Bill.

"Well, I suppose there's no use hanging around here. I'm sure the Order knows I'm here by now, and I'd rather not give them enough time to get organized. Tell Grilthauk to set some of that arkanite he brought out of my vault earlier aside for my armor, just in case I don't make it back here for whatever reason."

"Take care, Harry, and just try not to hurt the Order too badly. They're only trying to look out for you, after all. Dumbledore has them all convinced that you need constant protection."

Harry just shook his head noncommittally, amusement dancing in his forest green eyes as he turned and left the bank lobby, tiger

guardians following as always. He directed a pointed look at Hestia Jones as he passed, as if daring the woman to try and stop him. She didn't, and he stalked down the stone steps and followed the left wall, towards where the entrance to Liangshan Alley stood, according to Grilthauk. As Harry closed in on the end of the path, a sneering voice halted his advance.

"So, been enjoying your little vacation, have you, Potter? Well, it comes to an end now."

Harry kept his face impassive, aside from the slightest smirk, as he turned to meet his least favorite professor, sending a few quick mental commands to his two companions.

"...Snivellus. I trust you've had a nice holiday?"

Snape bared his yellow teeth slightly, not at all pleased with Harry's nonchalant tone, and, more particularly, his use of that mockingnickname. He was too busy glaring daggers at the young dakaathi hybrid to notice the two large cats circling into position behind him.

"No, Potter, I have not. How very childish and arrogant of you, running away from your relatives' home like a spoiled little boy, forcing the entire Order to halt its activities to search for you. You're an attention-seeking little brat, just like your..."

Harry interrupted him with an exaggerated yawn, motioning with his hand for effect. Grindelwald was now situated a few yards behind Snape and to his right, and Khariana was standing a ways directly behind and perpendicular to the greasy man's thin legs.

"Just like my arrogant, good-for-nothing father and my worthless, mangy godfather. I've heard this routine before. Now..."

At this point, Harry made a quick motion with his left hand, and Grindelwald opened his yap, spraying a jet of searing flame onto Snape's robes and bounding back into the alley before the latter could see him. Snape yelped slightly and looked around rapidly for the source of the attack, before finally turning back to Harry with pure hatred in his coal black eyes as he reached for his wand. However,

Harry already had his masterpiece wand in his hand and had taken aim, a mocking smile fixed onto his face.

“...Pugile.”

A metal gray jet flew from Harry's wand and struck Snape in the stomach with the force of a cannonball, propelling him backwards with a wet snapping sound that heralded the breaking of a few ribs. A nastier variant of a Bludgeoning Hex, the spell was one of the more painful legal dark curses. A fierce hacking sound emerged from the Hogwarts professor's mouth as the air was driven forcefully from his lungs. As he skidded backwards at a high velocity, Snape tripped over the waiting Khariana, and his momentum sent him sprawling across the entire alley, where he finally crashed through an apothecary window, slimy potions ingredients spilling onto his prone body. Harry felt a faked sense of sympathy for the apothecary owner, as the grease from Snape's hair would invariably ruin whatever it came into contact with.

Almost immediately, a whole slew of Order members arrived from outside of Harry's field of vision to check on Snape. Lupin, Tonks and McGonagall, followed by the Headmaster himself. Slowly, Dumbledore inclined his head towards the source of the sudden attack on his potions professor, and found himself looking directly at Harry, who wagged his finger slightly at the old man with that same mocking smile, and turned towards the entrance to Liangshan Alley. Harry prodded the solid wall at the far end of the path with his wand, and it separated to grant him access. Grindelwald and Khariana ran through the entrance first, and Harry followed. Dumbledore looked on sadly as the passage closed behind Harry, and the boy was gone again.

Harry quickly looked around as he entered Liangshan Alley. It was certainly a contrast to the loud, bustling commercial district that was Diagon Alley, and was mostly filled with ornate residential complexes. There were people out and about, tending to their small balcony gardens and mingling on the street, but the place was still relatively quiet. Harry drew several odd looks and more than a few disdainful glares as he walked along the main alleyway. Grilthauk was right, these people didn't take kindly to outsiders. Not that Harry could really blame them, since he often wanted nothing to do with the

general wizarding public, himself. For the sake of not causing a ruckus, Harry moved along silently, ignoring the spiteful looks. If anybody foolishly attempted to attack him, then there would be Hell to pay, but he trusted that Grindelwald and Khariana would sufficiently intimidate any potential threats.

Liangshan Alley became increasingly noisy as it opened up into a large, circular marketplace. Again, it was nothing like Diagon Alley, with its shops and windows. Harry was strongly reminded of a bazaar, as peddlers and vendors had set up shop right in the middle of the large plaza, selling everything from pigs and ducks to weapons and elixirs. Buyers were likewise strewn about everywhere, all talking and yelling in rapid Chinese. Not understanding a word, Harry kept along the edges of the plaza, looking around for anything resembling a blacksmith's forge, an effort made difficult by the fact that he had never seen one. Focused as he was upon his destination, Harry never noticed a familiar pair of eyes widen slightly as he passed by. He reached another residential district, this one of a decidedly higher class than the previous, judging by the design of the buildings. Just as he began to survey the area, a soft voice sounded behind him.

"Harry, is that you?"

Grindelwald and Khariana whirled about on the spot, and Harry silently drew his wand, anticipating another possible confrontation. Keeping a defensive posture, he turned about languidly, but lowered his wand as he saw who stood before him.

"Cho. Yes, it's me."

Harry supposed that he shouldn't have been too surprised to see his former girlfriend here, if she could even be called that. Liangshan Alley was, after all, where many of the magical Chinese families lived. Well, she might be able to help him find Master Chang's forge, at least, as he had a strong suspicion that the two were related. The exotic Ravenclaw took a step towards him, a faint blush suffusing her features.

"What are you doing here? This place is dangerous for outsiders, Harry. How did you even get here?"

Harry felt a twinge of annoyance at the accusatory tone in her voice, but kept his face impassive. Looking into her eyes, he saw only concern, though, and allowed the comments to slide. Besides, he needed Cho's help at the moment, and snapping at her would only set the emotional girl off. He decided to answer her with a certain degree of truthfulness.

"I've come here to pay a visit to Master Ts'ao Chang, hopefully to have some body armor forged. I heard of his reputation through a friend at Gringotts, and was able to obtain a passport into Liangshan Alley from the bank on account of my status in the wizarding world. Only problem is, now I'm here and I have no idea where to find him."

Cho flashed Harry a sunny smile and took him by the hand.

"Ts'ao Chang is my uncle. He lives and works out of the family complex. I'll show you the way. Merlin, Harry, you've grown so much..."

Harry smirked slightly.

"Well, I'd say that I've been long overdue for a growth spurt. Wouldn't you agree?"

She nodded, the blush never leaving her exotic features.

"Shall we go, Harry?"

Harry nodded, looking down at his right hand, which Cho now held softly. She started to walk, and he allowed himself to be led, Grindelwald and Khariana trailing along behind the pair. Harry was strongly reminded of that first morning in the village, when Hitomi had led him to the bathing room at Kenzo's abode. Now that he recalled, he had first mistaken the kunoichi for Cho then. With that thought, Harry couldn't help but compare the two resplendent Asian beauties in his mind. In many ways, they were opposite sides of the same coin.

Hitomi was tall and slender, with rather pale porcelain features, though Harry assumed that the last feature had much to do with her

having grown up virtually devoid of any natural light in the dark forest village. She carried herself with a quiet grace, and her mercurial personality was ever capable of changing, though she was not much given to wide emotional outbursts. Her thoughts and feelings manifested through her actions, rather than her words. Hitomi Kurahawa was the soft, shimmering light in her world of darkness and shadow, a veritable moon goddess.

At this point, Harry looked over towards Cho, really drinking in her appearance for the first time. She, too, had grown slightly, having shot up an inch or so, though she was still rather short by the usual standards. Her body had started to fill out rather nicely, though, and her hips had flared out a bit. Her curves were in all the right places. She was dressed in a fancy Chinese robe, red and tailored of the finest Ssuehwan brocade. The look definitely suited her. Now in her seventeenth year, Cho was making the transition from a pretty girl to a beautiful woman. He unconsciously pulled her a bit closer.

She was very different from Hitomi, but also very much the same. Cho was petite, but her slight growth spurt had normalized that somewhat. Her skin was that exotic golden brown, and her raven hair shined in the sunlight. As she walked along before Harry, he noticed, not for the first time, the aura of pure sensuality that she seemed to exert. She was easily the most capricious girl Harry had ever known, completely capable of changing from ecstatic, to melancholy, to completely enraged within the span of a few seconds. Physically and emotionally, everything about Cho Chang shined as radiantly as the sun in the summer sky. Clouds of grief and regret had obscured her last year, but the deep overcast was finally beginning to lift. She was truly a living sun goddess. Her voice snapped Harry from his reverie.

"We're here, Harry."

Looking around, Harry saw a tall building, very Chinese in design, fenced in by a high stone wall and barred by an iron gate. The gate swung open as Cho approached and granted entrance to the small party. Harry saw a beautiful water garden in front of the building, looking around as Cho led him over a small wooden bridge to a set of large red doors, which opened with a slight touch from the beautiful Ravenclaw. Harry stopped for a moment as she led him inside.

“This entire place belongs to your family, Cho?”

Cho nodded, looking rather embarrassed at her family’s affluence. Obviously, she was unaware of the vast fortune that Harry controlled. He briefly wondered why she flew around on that old Comet Two-Sixty when her family was obviously as wealthy as any of the old pureblooded lines, save perhaps some of the most ancient and elite, such as Evans, Black and Malfoy.

“Yes, my family was one of the first to emigrate from China into wizarding Britain. We’ve been here since Liangshan Alley’s founding in the late eighteenth century. Many of the people you saw in the first residential alley and at the marketplace are newer arrivals. We had a huge influx in the years following Mao Tse-tung’s rise to power in China. We’re one of the more influential families here, and regularly control the alley’s prefecture.”

Harry nodded, actually interested in the story.

“So, how long has your uncle been doing his work?”

“Several decades, I think, long before I was born. Come with me, I’ll introduce you. You’ll have to tell me about your two new pets later.”

Had Harry been paying attention, he would have noticed that the sunstone pieces in his wand’s composite discharge stone were glowing faintly.

Cho led Harry through the winding hallways of the Chang complex, which were vaguely reminiscent of a Chinese imperial palace, with wooden walls and gold plating, jade flooring and red carpet everywhere. Grindelwald and Khariana still tapered along behind, as they presently reached a large room with a forge. Looking to his left, Harry saw a short, powerfully built man laboring over a sword on a table. Master Chang, he assumed. Ts’ao Chang looked up as he heard the group’s entry, taking in Harry’s appearance before glancing over to his niece.

“Cho Li Ling, what is the meaning of this intrusion? You know better than to interrupt my work...”

“Uncle, this is Harry Potter, a boy from my school. He’s come to ask to have some work done. Gringotts gave him a permit into the alley.”

Ts’ao again looked at Harry, more carefully this time, taking particular notice of the young man’s lithe but powerful build, and his refined, dangerous aura. Nodding in approval, he turned back to Cho.

“Very well. You may leave us now. I need to speak with the young man personally. Take the two cats with you.”

If Cho was angered by her uncle’s curt dismissal, she didn’t show it. She smiled slightly at Harry and turned to Grindelwald and Khariana.

“Come on, you two. I’ll let you run around out back.”

The two large beasts looked to Harry for direction, who gave a permissive nod. They left with Cho, as Harry turned to Ts’ao. The master blacksmith regarded him curiously.

“So, Cho says that you have come with the goblins’ blessing, and that you would have me craft armaments for you. What would you have me do, Mr. Potter?”

“I require a breastplate to go underneath my robes, and a set of gauntlets and leg armor. I would prefer that they offer both physical and magical resistance, though the latter is the priority. And please, it’s Harry.”

Ts’ao inclined his head, pleased with Harry’s straightforward manner and lack of flattery.

“In what material?”

“Arkanite.”

That got his undivided attention.

“There is no arkanite left in this world, Harry. The last veins dried up decades ago.”

"I have a large stockpile of raw arkanite stored within my family's vault. I can have a sufficient quantity brought down to you within the next few days."

"Very well, then. I would suggest having the armaments plated in another mineral in addition to the arkanite."

"Why is that?"

"Arkanite is extremely resistant, to both physical and magical attacks. However, it is also very difficult to mold, and more or less impossible to carve runes or designs upon. In order to add enchantments to the works, or to implement a customized design, you will need to use another mineral as plating, and place the additions upon that. The magical properties of the runes and the arkanite will bond the two layers together. I would suggest a magically powerful material. What would you like to use?"

Harry pondered the matter for a moment. Taking a glance at his ring, he came up with an idea.

"Would jade work? I rather like the material, and it matches my ring."

"An excellent suggestion. Now, as for runic enhancements, I would suggest charms for increased durability and magical resistance, particularly for the jade, and for weightlessness. Anything else would be largely unnecessary, and would somewhat inhibit the magic of the enchantments that you do need. Does this meet with your approval?"

"Yes, that will work nicely."

"Good, now, I'll need you to remove your robes so that I can observe your physiological dimensions."

Harry removed his black formal robe, leaving him only in his trousers, as Ts'ao lightly felt over his physique. Harry could practically sense the master blacksmith's surprise as his callused hands ran over his invisible wings, but said nothing. The older man had the professional

sense not to ask questions. Quickly enough, Ts'ao was finished, and Harry fitted his robe back on.

“Well, I can see that you’re quite well-built, and magically powerful as well. I’ll need to leave space in the back for those mysterious feathered appendages of yours to feed through, but I must say that I’m looking forward to crafting these armaments. Now, I have a request. I will knock a full ten thousand galleons off of the overall price if you allow me to choose the custom designs for each piece. I promise that you won’t be disappointed, and I like for all of my works to have my personal touch.”

Harry didn’t really care for the aesthetics, as long as the armaments protected him properly. For his part, Master Chang had a considerable level of skill in divination, and was able to craft his works to suit the future state of his clients. Thus, the design that he could incorporate onto Harry’s armaments now would come to be reflective of his destiny, perhaps years into the future. However, the master blacksmith was certain that Harry would accomplish great things, and wanted to make certain that his work was physically and artistically equal to them. Harry simply nodded.

“Yes, that will be fine. What will the bill come to, Master Chang?”

“It is a great honor to be trusted to work with arkanite, Harry, but it is also a very difficult task, especially with the jade plating. Magical fusion of materials is always intricate work, but this case is particularly difficult, as it involves a fusion of a metal and a stone. Further, I will have to place all of my other projects on stasis to be able to complete yours within the month. As it stands, your bill will come to no less than seventy five thousand gold galleons, including the ten thousand discount.”

Seventy five thousand galleons, now that was a hefty chunk of change. Still, Harry needed the armor, and that gold was going to do him no good if he was dead. He had no actual choice but to accept.

“...Very well. You can draft the bill directly from my accounts at Gringotts. Either the Evans vault or the Black vault will do, whichever you prefer.”

Ts'ao smiled at Harry.

"Excellent. I will head on over to the bank and pick up that arkanite myself. I want to get started as soon as possible. I will send an owl when the work is completed. If you cannot make it back here, then I will send the armaments with Cho to Hogwarts, so that you may collect them there."

Master Chang left with a slight spring in his step, unwittingly leaving Harry to find his own way around the sprawling complex. Thankfully, he more or less remembered the path to the exit from earlier, and managed not to get lost. As he approached the large red doors of the main entrance, he found Cho conversing with a Chinese couple. Probably her parents, he thought. A potentially awkward situation was thankfully avoided as Cho's father, a handsome man dressed in black robes made of the same material as his daughter's, noticed Harry coming down the corridor.

"And you must be Harry Potter. Our daughter speaks often of you. I am Song Chang, and this is my wife, Da Qin. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Cho's mother, an attractive woman dressed in traditional clothing, bowed slightly as Harry shook her husband's hand. It wasn't difficult to see where Cho got her looks. Harry was rather amused by the fact that the pretty Ravenclaw gushed about him at home. What he wouldn't have given for that tidbit of knowledge a year or so ago.

"It's nice to meet you both as well."

"Whatever you've asked my brother to do, it has him happier than I've seen him in years. I imagine he'll be holed up in his forge for weeks. Now, it's getting rather late. Supper will be served within the hour, as soon as our errant blacksmith returns from Gringotts. Would you care to join us, Harry?"

Harry was rather hungry, and he had no particular reason to decline the invitation. He nodded.

"Certainly, if you don't mind having me."

The next hour saw Harry seated in the first floor lounge of the Chang complex making small talk with Cho and her family, mostly with her father. Neither of the women spoke much, but Harry paid no mind to the fact. The topics of discussion mostly centered on his school activities, and his future plans. Harry gave the vague lie of planning to become an auror, since he wasn't about to divulge his actual plans. He learned that Cho's father was the economic advisor to Liangshan Alley's prefect. Soon enough, Ts'ao returned from the bank, and the assembled group headed upstairs to the dining hall.

Dinner was exquisite, with three courses of Chinese cuisine. Thankfully, Harry had become rather adept in the use of chopsticks during his month in the village, as Kenzo also never used western utensils in his home, and had no problems eating. Cho sent Harry a surprised smile upon seeing him using the sticks properly. There was no conversation during the meal, but once the table had been cleared, Cho's father looked over at Harry.

"Harry, I couldn't help but notice that ring upon your finger. It's quite beautiful. May I ask how you came to possess it?"

Cho looked inquisitively at Harry as well, as if the question had also been on her mind. He saw no reason not to answer, since these people didn't have any real contact with the mainstream wizarding public. Well, aside from Cho, but he wasn't particularly worried about her spreading his personal business around. Just to be safe, though, he decided not to mention any particulars.

"It's the heritage ring of my mother's line. It came into my possession when I accepted the lordship of the family a month ago."

Cho gasped breathlessly, as her mother looked over to Harry.

"Lord of the estate at sixteen? That must be quite a responsibility."

Cho's parents exchanged glances, and Harry knew there was something more to this conversation than he understood. Her father continued the discussion.

“Are you also the head of your father’s estate? Cho has told us the story of your upbringing and the attack upon your parents. We understand that it’s quite famous outside of our alley, within the remainder of wizarding society.”

“Unofficially, yes, I am the head of the Potter family, and I have also been made heir to my godfather’s line, as he had none of his own. I have yet to be legally installed in either case, though. Both should be finalized in the coming weeks.”

Cho’s parents smiled conspiratorially, as her father made his next remark.

“Sixteen years of age, and the head of three prominent families. Tell me, Harry, have you chosen a bride yet?”

Harry’s eyes widened slightly, and Cho looked as if she would have liked nothing more than to crawl into a hole somewhere and never come out again. So, that was why Cho’s father had taken such a keen interest in his future plans. A few months ago, Harry would have thought that he had died and gone to Heaven. Now, things were quite a bit more complicated. He could certainly do worse than the exotic beauty, but he was in no mood to talk about marriage, particularly given the fact that he and Cho weren’t even seeing one another. That, and Hitomi was liable to cut his throat out as he slept.

“I’m in the market, I suppose. I really haven’t given the matter much thought.”

Ts’ao, thankfully, chose to change the direction of the conversation.

“Harry, can you tell me what exactly is going on out in Diagon Alley? I was accosted by no less than four people upon entry, all of them asking for your whereabouts. A few even tried to follow me back into Liangshan Alley later. Thankfully, the wards repelled them. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Who can say? I think that will depend on how our beloved Headmaster reacts to my cursing his Potions professor. I don’t imagine that there’s much he can do about it, though. He needs me

too much to expel me. As for the blockade, there are some select people within the wizarding community that presume upon having some right to lock me up and throw away the key, under the excuse that it's for my own safety, the Headmaster and his staff being chief among them. Naturally, I disagree with their reasoning..."

Harry glanced over at Cho, who seemed to have gotten over her embarrassment and was listening to the exchange with rapt attention. Of course, he did just admit that he'd hexed one of their professors, so he couldn't particularly blame her for being interested. At any rate, the entire discussion was starting to spiral out of control, and Harry thought it prudent to take his leave. The clock on the far wall provided him with the excuse he needed. It was nearing ten o'clock in the evening.

"...I'll have to ask you all to excuse me. It's nearing ten o'clock, and I have a late engagement this evening. Thank you for a wonderful meal."

Cho's father nodded.

"It was a pleasure having you, Harry. Cho will see you to the Diagon Alley entrance. Do come visit us again sometime before the start of term."

Harry replied that he would, despite having no intention of doing so. He started for the main entrance to the complex, Cho following right behind. As soon as they got down the stairs, she turned to him.

"Harry, I am so sorry about my father. I can't believe that he was so blunt..."

He simply shrugged.

"Don't worry about it. So, was he serious?"

"I'm afraid so. Mum and dad have been on my case for the better part of the past year to find an acceptable husband, or else they'd find one for me. It's not as if such things are uncommon in my culture, but after Cedric..."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Still, she didn't look like she was about to start wailing, which was at least a small improvement. He instead decided to attempt to lighten the atmosphere somewhat.

"So, I'm acceptable, then? I thought the people here didn't like outsiders."

"Oh, that's true, most of the newer arrivals don't. My family has been here for centuries, Harry, and my father thinks that it's time for us to do away with this isolationist mindset of ours. He feels that it's up to him to set a precedent for others among us to follow. He's determined to see me married off into a prominent pureblooded wizarding family. That was his whole rationale for sending me to Hogwarts. And here you come along, a living legend in the outside world and head of three ancestral lines. He couldn't resist the urge to play matchmaker. Now, did you really curse Professor Snape?"

Harry was a bit impressed with how quickly she managed to change directions. Capricious, indeed. Also, his dakaathi charm didn't seem to affect her as it had most other women he had encountered recently. Hitomi didn't seem to have been too heavily influenced by it, either, at least until they had shagged. Maybe it had something to do with Harry still being mostly human.

"Yeah, earlier this afternoon. He confronted me at the Liangshan Alley entrance, wanted to haul me off to wherever Dumbledore thought I'd be safest. I didn't cooperate with him, wands were drawn, and I blasted the greasy git clear across Diagon Alley. I would imagine that the old man's goon squad is still waiting for me to come out."

Cho arched an eyebrow.

"And you're still going out there?"

"What other choice do I have? I can't apparate, and I doubt anybody around here is connected to the Floo Network."

“Actually, there is one connection. A few summers ago, I asked Marietta to have her mother connect a small chimney in a back room of this complex to the network, so I could leave home without my parents knowing. A lot of times, I feel like I’m going to suffocate here. I’m so sick of my father’s constant meddling, Harry. He thinks that every aspect of my life should be molded to fit his own needs and beliefs. Quidditch was my one rebellion against him. He was furious when I made the team. He doesn’t think the game is a proper pursuit for a marriageable young lady, and refused to buy me a proper broomstick. But enough about my problems, let me show you to the floo chamber.”

Harry was surprised with how similar Cho’s situation was to his own. Both struggled heavily against forces trying to push them in one direction or another. At that point, he felt a certain connection to the Chinese beauty, as if they were on some sort of wavelength. Looking into her eyes, he was pretty sure she felt it as well. He was vaguely reminded of the peculiar sensation that he had felt for Hitomi, that underlying aura of tangible fondness. He had no time to explore the situation further at the moment, though, as he didn’t want to be too late for his liaison with Narcissa Malfoy. After all, Harry would have more than enough time to figure out what exactly Cho Chang was to him at Hogwarts. For now, he simply smiled at her.

“Lead the way, then.”

Cho smiled back and led him towards the rear of the complex, along a rather straightforward route. They arrived at a small guest bedroom, with a fireplace and a small dish of floo powder. She pulled him down slightly and pecked his cheek, before walking off with an unreadable look. Pondering the entire matter for a moment longer, Harry came to a certain realization. He had virtually told her that he was at odds with Dumbledore, even that he had assaulted a Hogwarts professor, and still, she hadn’t even sent so much as a reproachful look at him. Cho didn’t seem to be at all aware of exactly what Harry was up to, but she had knowingly assisted him in eluding Dumbledore. Perhaps she was just as inclined to stand up against those around her as Harry recently had come to find himself. He’d have to speak with her at length upon returning to Hogwarts. Shaking his head, Harry grabbed a pinch of floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace.

“Hotel Verdant, Room 605.”

With a flash of green flame, Harry tumbled gracefully into the entrance lobby of a posh hotel suite. Looking around, he suddenly realized that he had forgotten about Grindelwald and Khariana back at the Chang complex. He cursed under his breath, realizing that he'd have to make another trip back to retrieve them. Two soft cracking noises sounded to either side of him, and he looked about to see the two tigers standing right there as if they had come through the floor with him. Yet another benefit of their symbiotic magical bond to Harry, it seemed. He directed the two to rest in the small lounge at the near end of the lobby as he headed into the bedroom.

Harry arrived to find a slightly irritated Narcissa sitting at a small table in the room. His shadow cast through the dimly lit room, making her aware of his presence. She turned to him with a haughty sneer.

“You're late.”

“Only fashionably so. Besides, I see you've had no difficulty making yourself comfortable.”

Harry sat down gently in a posh chair across from Narcissa, taking in the older woman's appearance. She was dressed in a black satin gown that exposed an enormous amount of cleavage, and that was cut off only slightly below the hips. At least she was dressed for the occasion, Harry thought with a mental smirk. She poured Harry a glass of champagne and handed it to him before speaking.

“Now, you're most likely wondering why I've requested to meet with you?”

Harry simply raised an eyebrow, feeling no need to make the obvious lewd comment. He downed a good portion of his champagne in one swallow.

“Very much so. Please enlighten me, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“Call me Narcissa, and I've asked you here so that I might request that you intercede on my behalf with the President of Gringotts, since

you claim to be familiar with him. I need for you to have my son supplanted as the controller of the Malfoy finances, or at least have a limit placed upon his spending.”

“His spending? What could Draco possibly be buying that puts a fortune as vast as the Malfoy inheritance in any sort of fiscal danger?”

Narcissa chose not to respond to the question, not that Harry had particularly expected her to. She was intelligent enough not to be goaded into blabbing any potentially damaging information.

“That is unimportant. Can you do it?”

“I’m certain that I can. I have a pretty good idea what your little ferret of a son is up to, and it also suits my own prerogatives to shut him down. Consider it done. However, I’m assuming that you’ll want to be placed in control of the finances yourself?”

For a moment, she had thought that she would be able to get this done simply on the basis of mutual utility, and that she wouldn’t have to pleasure the boy. It seemed obvious now that he had no intention of letting her off so easily. Of course, she really didn’t find the idea all that repulsive.

“Of course. I’m fairly certain that we can come to an agreement on the matter.”

[Content deleted]

Harry awoke with a warm weight pressed against his body. Looking over, he found it to be a naked Narcissa Malfoy, as vivid memories of the previous evening burned through the haze of his mind. In all honesty, he hadn’t particularly enjoyed the experience beyond the actual act of sex. With Hitomi the night before last, there had been some significant level of meaning behind the act, a sensation of mutual understanding between the two. However, sex with Narcissa was just that. He had no fondness for the woman at all, and had only agreed to the arrangement for the absolutely delicious coup of having shagged Lucius Malfoy’s wife. He would keep to his end of the deal, but only because it suited his own interests to snatch the Malfoy fortunes away from Voldemort’s resource pool. A stirring next to him

indicated that Narcissa had awoken. Fixing a smirk onto his face, he looked down to her.

“Good morning, Mrs. Malfoy. I do hope that I performed adequately?”

“That would be an understatement. Perhaps we should discuss a more permanent business arrangement.”

Yeah, right, Harry thought. What could she possibly offer him now? The sex hadn't been that spectacular. Still, he might as well play along. She could surprise him with something useful, after all.

“Oh? And what terms do you have in mind?”

Narcissa flashed a grin, the first genuine look of mirth that he had seen from her.

“Simple barter, nothing complicated. My information in exchange for your services.”

“And what information might that be?”

“Don't be foolish. You know exactly what information. My idiot son and psychotic sister can't keep their lips sealed to save their own lives. Not a day passes where I can evade being forced to listen to one or both of them prattle on about the Dark Lord's petty schemes. Most of them concern you, at least indirectly. We can meet every other week, at slightly varying intervals as to avoid unnecessary suspicion. So, do we have a deal?”

Harry considered the matter. He wasn't entirely sure that he could trust the woman, but at the very least, whatever information she provided could be cross-referenced with that gleamed by his grounded espionage network. Besides, he could tell that Narcissa was obviously desperate for a decent lover, and could probably be plied into performing certain other tasks for him should the need arise.

“Very well, it seems like a fair exchange. This room, two weeks from tomorrow evening?”

Narcissa nodded, before kissing Harry thoroughly and slipping her gown back on. Yes, he thought, he definitely preferred Hitomi's taste. Maybe he'd try Cho later on, though, and make another comparison. Soon enough, Narcissa left for Malfoy Manor, leaving Harry in the hotel suite wondering what to do with his day. He had no more shopping to do, and neither his robes nor his armaments would be done for some time. Grilthauk had his own issues to deal with as President of Gringotts, though Harry did remind himself to send the old goblin an owl about the Malfoy situation as soon as he was able. Kenzo and the rest of the Shinn Kohaku were likewise busy preparing to leave the village and report to their individual assignments. Returning to the Chang complex was out of the question, as Harry had no particular desire to be a conduit through which Cho's father could complicate her life further. In the end, he decided simply to bite the bullet and floo over to Order Headquarters. He was going to have to deal with Dumbledore sooner or later, and he could always find a way to leave if the need arose. Besides, he missed Mrs. Weasley's cooking. Harry fastened his robe and made sure his effects were in place before stalking over to the fireplace, whistling for Grindelwald and Khariana. The two beasts rested their heads against Harry's legs, as he grabbed a handful of floo powder.

"Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

(End Chapter Eight)

Author's Note: Well, I'm really not very happy with the way this one turned out. Almost the entire chapter was devoted to pairing stuff, with Cho getting a huge emphasis, and then jumping over to the Harry/Narcissa. It felt like writing a soap opera, and putting it together wasn't an enjoyable experience at all. Speaking of which, I really don't want to see a bunch of reviews bitching about my giving Cho a significant role in the story. I have many reasons for including her, and many of you can probably start to see some of them already. I can promise that there will be little to no pairing driven stuff in the next few chapters, and we're only a few updates away from Hogwarts.

Thanks for the reviews, folks. Keep them coming.

Harry fastened his robe and made sure his effects were in place, and stalked over to the fireplace, whistling for Grindelwald and Khariana. The two beasts rested their heads against Harry's legs, as he grabbed a handful of floo powder.

"Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

Chapter Nine: Ordered Chaos – Blood Brother

Preliminary Author's Note: This chapter has been rewritten and reposted, and I really wouldn't want to wake up tomorrow morning and find my story has been banned for posting an author's note as a chapter. I don't think any of my readers would report me for something so trivial, but as the old saying goes: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." The next installment should be up by Monday evening, if all goes according to plan.

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace at Grimmauld Place with the same grace as he had the previous evening at the hotel, this time managing to land on his feet. Grindelwald and Khariana collided in midair and landed in a colorful heap, but quickly regained their bearings. The sitting room was empty, but the overpowering smell of bacon and maple syrup coming from the kitchen indicated that breakfast was currently being served. Harry motioned for his two pets to stay put while he stalked forward to investigate, masking his magical signature and being especially careful to make no noise. Reaching the entrance to the dining room, he saw that most of the Weasleys were present, with Molly, Arthur, Ron, Ginny, Bill and the twins sitting at the table. Sitting at Bill's side was Fleur Delacour, which surprised Harry. He had heard from Ron that the two were dating, but hadn't quite believed it and had never thought to ask Bill. Hermione was likewise sitting to Ron's left, but aside from the aforementioned, very few Order members were present. Only Tonks and Kingsley, who were most likely just grabbing a bit to eat before work, and Mundungus joined them.

Harry slid into the room unnoticed, as the group had its attention fixated on Arthur Weasley as he prattled on about something or the other. Harry didn't particularly care what, though he imagined it had something to do with the Weasley patriarch's job at the Ministry. He sat down in the nearest seat, on Ron's other side, and quietly filled a plate. At this point, Bill happened to glance over in Harry's direction, and saw him sitting there as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The eldest Weasley son's eyes widened a bit, but Harry only smirked back at him and turned in Ron's direction.

"Oi, Ron. Pass me the syrup, mate."

Ron answered automatically as he reached for the requested item and turned in Harry's direction.

"Yeah, sure thing, Har...Harry!"

Harry smiled saccharinely and nodded back to his best friend, whose exclamation effectively halted the conversation around him. All eyes flew to Harry, whose changed appearance caused shock to register in a few, and lust to shine in a few others.

"Well, good morning, everybody. I'm sure you won't mind me joining you for breakfast?"

Ron immediately pulled Harry out of his chair and wrapped him up in a brotherly hug. Certainly not what he was expecting, but his trained reflexes kept him from losing his balance. Harry arched an eyebrow at his friend, but the effect was ruined as another red headed figure, as well as one with bushy brown hair summarily tackled him. Ginny and Hermione had latched themselves to his sides with tears in their eyes. Glancing about, he noticed that Molly was likewise near tears. Harry supposed that he should be touched by the show of affection and devotion, but his thoughts only centered on how he could turn it to his advantage. Feeling a bit stifled, he turned back to Ron and patted him on the back.

"Hey, I missed you too, mate, but if you don't let go soon I'm liable to start wondering about you."

Ron leapt back as if Harry had suddenly transformed into a particularly nasty arachnid, albeit with a genuine smile on his face. Harry rolled his eyes comically and nuzzled the hair of his two female assailants until they let go, both blushing heavily. Of course, as soon as they did, Mrs. Weasley enveloped him in a bear hug of her own.

“Where have you been, Harry Potter? We have been so worried about you! Oh, I have to go and floo Albus! He’ll want to know that you’re safe at Headquarters!”

With that, Molly scampered off into the sitting room. Harry hoped that she wouldn’t notice Grindelwald and Khariana as he sat back down to breakfast. He didn’t have much time to eat, as the inquisition began almost immediately, Ron predictably firing the first salvo.

“Seriously, mate, where have you been? Like mum said, we’ve all been worried like Hell. You shoulda been here when Moody came in with the news that you had left the muggles. It was like somebody set off about a hundred Howlers in here. So, what gives?”

Harry sighed, but looked up with a forced smile. He noticed Bill looking at him with a calculating expression and Fleur smiling amicably to his side.

“I guess I just needed to get away from things for awhile. Well, that wasn’t really all of it. I got this weird letter from Gringotts the afternoon I came home from Privet Drive, saying they needed to discuss something with me. It just set a whole chain of events into motion, and I ended up spending the last month training, learning advanced magic and dueling technique. I think I learned more than I have in all five years at Hogwarts.”

Naturally, this got Hermione particularly interested, though she took her usual admonishing tone.

“Well, I’m glad to know that you’ve been putting your time to good use, but did you have to leave your relatives, Harry? Dumbledore would have sent you books to study from if you had requested them, or I would have been happy to. I know you hate it at Privet Drive, Harry,

but Dumbledore wouldn't send you there if he didn't have a good reason."

Harry suppressed his annoyance, knowing that Hermione meant well, and was just being Hermione. Besides, he didn't particularly need to raise any more of a ruckus than his sudden arrival already had.

"There are a lot of things you can't just learn from books, Hermione. Learning to duel properly requires a partner, and I did a lot of other practical stuff as well. I'll explain everything to you guys later, I promise. Besides, I don't think I could have taken another summer with the Dursleys. As you can see, I'm perfectly fine. The only wizard that's accosted me in the entire month I've been gone is Snape, and that was just yesterday afternoon."

Ron, of course, couldn't resist the urge to comment on that.

"Snape tried to attack you? Where? That damned greasy git, I don't know why Dumbledore keeps him around."

"He saw me leaving Madame Malkin's yesterday. Don't worry, mate, I blasted him clear across Diagon Alley and through an apothecary..."

Harry was cut off in mid-sentence by the arrival of the Headmaster, flanked by Snape and had a severe look on his face, and his eyes were devoid of their usual twinkle. Snape, Harry noted with satisfaction, was in noticeable pain as he swept along. The young dakaathi hybrid only looked at them with an obviously faked innocence.

"Hello, professors. I hope I haven't caused you too much trouble this morning?"

Dumbledore looked around the room.

"Children, would you please excuse us? Young Harry has some explaining to do."

Hermione, Ginny, and especially Ron complained loudly at being excluded, but eventually stood and left when they noticed the growing

anger on Mrs. Weasley's face. Mundungus beat a hasty retreat, knowing that the woman's rage would invariably be turned on him as well. She had never forgiven him for his negligence regarding the Dementor incident at Privet Drive the previous summer. Harry didn't really want them around for the coming firestorm either, preferring to explain his circumstances to his friends on his own terms. Once they had left, he surveyed the gathered Order members, noticing that Tonks and Kingsley had also left at some point. He sent a wink at Bill, who responded with an amused smirk.

"Harry, would you please explain to me why you felt the need to abandon the safety of your relatives' home?"

Harry looked up at the old man, purposefully avoiding direct eye contact. He had remembered Grilthauk telling him about the enhanced mental capacities of the dakaath a month back, and felt more or less confident in his ability to hold his own against a Legilimency attack, but decided not to give the Headmaster an open invitation to put it to the test. He sent a barely noticeable sneer at Snape, whose sallow skin flushed slightly in anger, and answered Dumbledore with a shrug and an intentionally flippant tone.

"Not much to say, really. Got a letter from Gringotts, the President's office. It seemed important, and the summons indicated as much, so I went. Uncle Vernon was more than happy to give me a ride."

The old man sighed. Harry could see a slight hint of disappointment in his eyes, as if admonishing him for so blatantly disregarding his safety. Still, there was no way he was going to go back to Privet Drive, no matter what Dumbledore tried to pull.

"Harry, you know that you must remain in your Aunt Petunia's home so that the blood protection can renew itself. It is not only for your own protection, but for theirs as well. I must insist that you prepare to re..."

"No..."

Snape strode forward, glaring.

“Do not interrupt the Headma...”

Harry glanced over at the angered Potions professor, drawing his masterpiece wand with both graceful speed and deadly precision. He pointed right at Snape’s injured ribs. As easy as it would probably be to curse him again, Harry didn’t want to arouse Dumbledore’s ire. He would act like he was still angry and grieving, and try to gain the old man’s sympathy. He was going to need it for the coming confrontation.

“How’s the injury, Snape? Now, go back into the corner like a good little boy, before I have to give you another spanking. I’ve had my fill of your childish grudges, and I have bigger issues to deal with.”

Snape sputtered, reaching into his robes, but Dumbledore stopped him with a gentle hand on the wrist.

“That will be enough, Severus. Minerva, please escort Severus to Madame Pomfrey. That injury needs treatment.”

Snape looked beyond murderous, as if catching Harry violating his memories the previous term had only been a minor annoyance by comparison. There was little he could do at the moment, however. He gathered himself with as much dignity as he could muster and left with the Transfiguration professor, robes billowing only slightly as he limped along. Dumbledore looked sadly at Harry.

“Was it really necessary to curse him yesterday, Harry? You know how fragile Professor Snape’s ego is. He will not rest until he has had his revenge, and will certainly attempt to strike back at you when I am not there to intercede on your behalf.”

“I’m not concerned about him, sir. He’s a sad, bitter little man, and only barely worth the energy I expended to hex him. Like I said, I have bigger issues to deal with. Losing Sirius taught me that.”

Dumbledore sighed again and smiled sadly, the twinkle returning faintly to his eyes. Harry smiled back at him, fighting down the slight urge to point and laugh at his gullibility.

"I understand your grief, Harry, but you cannot continue to vent your anger upon those around you. I shall attempt to smooth things over with Professor Snape upon returning to Hogwarts, but for now, may I ask what you learned as a result of your summoning to Gringotts?"

Harry took a brief glance at Bill, who was looking on with some concern. He nodded at his fellow conspirator, indicating that he knew how to handle this. He would come forward with just enough of the truth about his meeting with Grilthauk and his transformation to convince the old man that he wasn't hiding anything. The ring adorning his finger and the wings extending from his back were both telltale signs, and Harry knew that it would be impossible to stop Dumbledore from being at least somewhat wary of him in the future. He hoped that his voluntary return to Headquarters combined with his relative forthrightness would minimize the damage as much as possible.

"Well, originally they wanted to talk to me about Sirius's estate, and the fact that he had made me his heir, and thus the next head of the family. I was a bit suspicious, since I hardly thought that the simple matter of a will reading or whatever would require a meeting with the top level of the bank hierarchy and all. That matter has yet to be finalized, though."

Dumbledore nodded, just the slightest bit of the trademark twinkle returning to his eyes. He didn't speak for several moments, making Harry slightly suspicious.

"Professor? Is something the matter?"

"No, Harry. Forgive an old man's absentmindedness. Please, continue."

Harry was easily able to surmise that the old coot was laying plans, but was reassured by the fact that he was already a legal adult, and that Grilthauk would promptly shoot down any attempt Dumbledore might make to meddle in Harry's affairs at Gringotts. Besides, Harry was just about ready to drop the proverbial bomb on the old man. He was going to enjoy this.

“Right, I was then told that the real reason for my being summoned was that their investigation of my bloodlines turned up some questionable results, and that they had reason to believe that my mum wasn’t actually muggleborn like we had all thought...”

Dumbledore looked a bit surprised at this. Of course, Harry remembered, Grilthauk had secretly hidden Harry's maternal grandfather away after the final battle, so the old man probably wouldn't have thought that Lily could be pureblooded. However, he seemed to catch onto the implications very quickly, a fact visibly heralded by a dawning horror flashing through his eyes. The twinkle was gone again. As if to drive the final nail into the coffin, Harry flashed his ring.

“...They asked me to fit this ring onto my finger.”

The color almost immediately drained from the wizened sage's face. Harry mentally crowed at the picture before him. Having his victory secured, it was now time to assuage Dumbledore's worries and convince him that Harry was still the same Gryffindor golden boy from before. He had plans for his time at Hogwarts, and having Dumbledore constantly looking over his shoulder would hamper them significantly.

“I see, Harry. Did they tell you of its significance?”

Harry shook his head in the negative.

“No, they only told me that it was the legacy ring of my mother's line, and that she was never aware that she was the sole heiress to an old family. I tried to ask them about the family's history, but they suddenly got really quiet and evaded the question. I really came here today hoping you could explain some of it to me, aside from wanting to see Ron and Hermione.”

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly, the twinkle beginning to return to his eyes once again. Harry steeled himself to hear what was likely to be a very skewed interpretation of the events of half a century ago. Grilthauk's story was likewise biased, but Harry had read his great-

grandfather's journals during some of his leisure time in the village, and generally agreed with the old goblin's version of events.

"I would be happy to, Harry. However, the tale may be a bit difficult to swallow, and I must ask you to remain calm. Now, you must first know that the old Evans line is one of the wealthiest and most influential in all of wizarding Europe, as well as one of the most ancient. Many years ago, a young man named Alphonse was born into the family. He was a brilliant wizard, and many of his accomplishments have changed the wizarding world. However, he thirsted for knowledge, desiring to unravel the very essence of what makes us wizards and witches what we are. Some mysteries are not meant to be solved, Harry. One day, he found a book in his family's repository, one detailing a method through which the fabric between dimensions could be torn. He could not contain his curiosity, and strove to travel through the fabric of space and time himself. I am ashamed to admit that, in my ambitious youth, I assisted in his endeavor, lending him the power needed to open a portal. Seventy years passed, and one day, Alphonse returned from his journey, having spent all those years in a realm populated by the vilest of demons."

Harry bristled ever so slightly at this complete insult to his heritage, but again fought the emotions down. Exploding in rage now would ruin everything. At least Dumbledore was keeping to the general story, though Harry knew that the old man was spinning it to paint himself in a better light. He let the Headmaster continue.

"During his time in this demon realm, Alphonse had fallen into the blackest of magics, twisting his soul beyond salvation. I do not blame him entirely, Harry. The very air in the demon realm is toxic to the human spirit. I imagine that the brilliant wizard that I was proud to call my mentor was long since dead when his body came back through the portal. He sought to use his black magic to destabilize the wizarding world, while fear and paranoia were already at their height due to the horrors of the great muggle wars of the early half of the century. The creature that was once Alphonse Evans took advantage of this, styling himself Lord Grindelwald, and claiming to be an agent of Nazi Germany. All aspects of our society rallied against him, but the battle was terrible still. Many hybrid magical races, including the

goblins, flocked to Grindelwald's side, hoping to gain dominance over human wizards. In the end, I was able to defeat my former mentor and restore peace. I was not aware that he had fathered a child, and I haven't the faintest idea by whom. However, had he not, we would never have had your mother, nor you. I know this must be quite a shock, Harry, and I am sorry to place yet another burden onto your shoulders. You must remember that even the greatest wizards can fall prey to their own ambitions, and be vigilant that the same never happens to you."

Well, Harry thought, he had expected no less from Dumbledore. Bill was still listening in, looking pensive. Harry imagined that he was trying to hide his outrage at the old man's blatant misinterpretations as well. Fleur was looking sympathetically at Harry, as were Molly and Arthur. Harry decided to give them the show that they were obviously looking for. He purposely fashioned a sickened expression onto his face.

"Me, a child of a dark lord's line? No, that can't be true! I won't believe it!"

Harry sincerely hoped that this mock outburst had sufficiently rused the old man into believing that his Gryffindor hero remained untainted. Still, one could never truly tell what the old man was thinking. The sad smile and underlying flash of relief in his twinkling eyes gave Harry reason to believe that he had done well enough.

"No, Harry. You are Harry James Potter. Nothing more, and nothing less. Remember that it is our choices that define who we are, and not what we are born. The Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor, and you have sacrificed to help and protect the people that you care about on countless occasions. That makes you very different from Alphonse Evans, never forget. Now, is there anything else you would like to ask me about?"

"Yeah, one thing. For the few days prior to my trip to Gringotts, I had been feeling all of these odd sensations. When I put on the ring, they intensified and I sprouted a pair of wings, along with a few other changes. I'm sure you've noticed my hair. I don't really understand

any of it. Anyway, I managed to procure a vial of invisibility solution and hide them, so I wouldn't scare people."

Harry couldn't ever remember the Headmaster looking visibly stumped before. With his wrinkled face scrunched up even more than usual, it was a most unbecoming state.

"Would you allow me to have a look, Harry?"

Harry nodded and removed his silken robe. For a moment, he glanced at the tattoo on his chest, and realized that nobody else seemed to notice it. He guessed that Zharrghast could somehow hide himself from the vision of those not directly connected to him, but the sentient blade contained somewhere within Harry's essence deigned not to confirm or deny it. Harry noticed Molly Weasley blushing slightly at the sight of his topless form, and only barely suppressed a shudder. Fleur only seemed curious, though, which was fine with Harry. He didn't need Bill's girlfriend making passes at him and straining their relationship. Harry languidly turned his back to Dumbledore.

"You'll have to undo the effects of the solution."

"Of course. Reverso Invicium!"

As soon as Dumbledore's spell struck Harry's back, the wings phased into view. He remembered it had taken a few seconds when Alberto had used the same incantation on just a few of his feathers, a comparison indicative of the vast power difference between the two wizards. Dumbledore looked Harry's forest green wings over, nodding his head ever so slightly. The young dakaathi hybrid was fully aware that the old man had no clue what to make of the situation, but waited for an explanation regardless.

"Well, Harry, it would seem that you have some veela blood within you. However, the fact that your wings seem to be permanent is an odd phenomenon. I shall attempt to investigate the matter further. But first...Miss Delacour, perhaps you might be able to offer some insight?"

Fleur looked a bit surprised at being addressed all of a sudden.

“Non, ‘Eadmaster. I ‘ave never seen anything like ‘zis before.”

Dumbledore nodded.

“Very well. Harry, please remain here for the remainder of the day and spend some time with your friends. I will return tomorrow, and we will discuss the matter of your month’s disappearance and whether or not to return you to your relatives. Now, you’ll have to excuse me. I have a meeting with Minister Fudge to attend.”

Harry didn't believe for a second that Dumbledore had any such meeting. These most recent events had seemingly, at least from Harry's perspective, contradicted the old man's calculations enough that he was now being forced to make a tactical withdrawal and reconsider his position with regards to the younger wizard. Dumbledore would no doubt be better prepared for their next meeting, Harry thought with a bit of concern. Smiling broadly at Harry, Dumbledore rose and left, his eyes twinkling as brightly as ever. Arthur followed behind, stating that he was already late for work. Molly smiled through slightly teary eyes and gave Harry a hug, while performing a household warming charm on his breakfast plate.

“You must have been through quite a bit, dear. I can’t say that I approve of the hair, but that’s not important. Now, finish up your breakfast and go on upstairs to catch up with Hermione and Ron. I’m going to tidy up the living room.”

Molly left, and Harry quickly ate his breakfast, but not before folding his wings back against his body and putting his robes back on. Looking up, he saw Bill staring at him, decidedly amused. The remaining Weasley quickly threw up a silencing charm around the room.

“Well, you handled the old man better than I had hoped. He doesn’t seem to suspect anything. I was actually worried that you were going to curse Snape again and start up a brouhaha with Dumbledore. Not that I would have blamed you, mind...”

Harry shook his head slightly, tossing a quick glance over at Fleur. Bill noticed his implication and assured him.

“...Oh, and don’t worry about Fleur. She knows, and she’s loyal.”

The stunning French quarter-veela smiled at Harry.

“Oui, do not worry, ‘Arry. Bill ‘as told me all about what you’ve been doing. I will ‘elp you in any way I can. I ‘ave not forgotten about what you did for my seester.”

Harry nodded, having no reason to doubt her, or to question Bill’s judgment of her loyalty.

“Great to have you with us, then. Now, I’m not ready to believe that I have Dumbledore completely convinced of anything quite yet. We still haven’t addressed the issue of my disappearance, or of my blasting Snape and then blatantly walking away from the Order yesterday. Still, I do think that he’s genuinely inclined to believe that nothing has really changed between the two of us. He’ll keep a closer eye on me for awhile, but I just have to be careful and stay under the old man’s radar.”

“Right, well, I have to be leaving for Gringotts here in a minute. Since you’re obviously stuck here for the day, do you need anything?”

Harry smirked ever so slightly.

“Yeah, if you could pick up my bags from my stay in the village, particularly my yukata collection and my books, I’d appreciate it. Also, grab me a bottle of firewhiskey and a vial of Calming Draught on the way back for lunch. For some reason, I imagine that I’ll be needing both.”

Bill could barely suppress his mirth.

“Anything else, Your Majesty?”

“Ask Grilthauk to schedule both Sirius’s will reading and the transferal of the Potter estate for early next week, on my birthday. And tell him to be on the lookout for an owl from me.”

“Sure thing, Harry. See you at lunch.”

"Later, Bill. I appreciate it."

With that, Bill strode off, dragonhide boots clicking on the wooden floor, leaving only Harry and Fleur, who looked at him with laughter shining in her cerulean eyes.

“You are quite ‘ze commander, non, ‘Arry?”

Harry kept the small smirk on his face.

“You’d better believe it. Well, I’ll be headed upstairs. I’ve got Hermione and half a bushel of Weasleys waiting for the latest.”

“I ‘zink I weel go with you, ‘Arry. It is either ‘zat or get forced to ‘elp Bill’s muzzer with ‘ze ‘ousework.”

“Not a domestic veela, then?”

“Most certainly not, ‘Arry. Shall we?”

Fleur extended her arm daintily, and Harry took it with amusement. At least, he hoped she was only playing around with him. He rather enjoyed the short banter, and wished for a moment that he had gotten to know the part-veela better during the Triwizard Tournament. They reached the top of the stairs quickly enough, and Harry released her arm. It might have just been innocent flirting to the two of them, but he somehow doubted that Ron or Ginny would find any humor in seeing their friend walking arm-in-arm with their eldest brother’s girlfriend, not to mention Hermione. Harry heard conversation coming from one of the rooms to the left and headed in, finding his three friends sprawled about on the floor, Hermione and Ginny petting his two errant tigers.

“So, this is where you two have been. Naughty.”

Five heads: two human, two feline, and one weasel, snapped over to the doorway, from where Harry strode into the room and plopped down onto the large bed. Judging from the abundance of Chudley Cannons memorabilia spread about, it was Ron's bedroom. Fleur slid in behind him and sat carefully down onto the bed as well, apparently bit too close to Harry for Hermione's liking, if the slight scowl was any indicator. She let it slide, though, and turned to Harry.

"What happened with you and Professor Dumbledore, Harry? Are you going to be able to stay here for the rest of summer?"

"I would imagine so. Dumbledore said we would discuss it tomorrow, but he can't really force me to go back to Privet Drive. So, I'll either stay here or go find somewhere else on my own. I've had enough of those muggles to last the rest of my life."

Hermione frowned slightly.

"Harry, you shouldn't defy Dumbledore like that. He's only trying to do what's best..."

Harry decided not to get into this argument, and quickly moved to change the subject. Besides, her heart hadn't seemed to have been completely behind the admonishment. That intrigued Harry, but he was given no time to consider the implications, knowing that he was expected to make conversation now.

"No worries, I doubt he's going to try to send me back there anyway."

Ginny piped in.

"So, what were you two talking about down there, anyway?"

"He just wanted to know why I left the muggles, mostly."

"Why did you, anyway? I mean, I'm not blaming you, but it was only the second day of break. They couldn't have driven you out of your mind that quickly..."

Harry smiled mysteriously.

“Oh, you’d be surprised. But the actual reason I left was...”

Harry went on to tell his friends more or less the same story that he had told Dumbledore, of his receiving the letter from Gringotts and arranged meeting with a high member of the bank hierarchy. He didn’t mention Grilthauk at all, either by name or by title, figuring that Hermione would know all about the President almost never meeting with wizard clientele. Harry just wanted to get through the story quickly. He told of the pretense of summoning him to London regarding the Black estate, of being given the ring, and used Dumbledore’s explanation for his transformation. Naturally, they demanded to see his wings, and so he ended up shrugging off his robe a second time.

He read the countenances of each of his friends while he spoke of his being ordained Lord Evans, of his emancipation, and of his connection to Grindelwald. None of them showed any signs of anger or disgust, though Ron looked a bit uneasy. He had imagined that they would take the news much worse, even though Grindelwald was long before their time. He went on to describe his trip down into the Evans complex in detail, explaining the contents of each room and promising to show them the place sometime. Hermione took a particular interest in the library, naturally. Once that leg of the story had been told, Ron asked another question, his face unreadable.

“So, mate, where did you go after touring the vault?”

Harry knew that he needed to invent an explanation here, as he didn’t want to reveal anything about the Shinn Kohaku and risk blowing the tenuous cover he was keeping.

“I hid out in Knockturn Alley for awhile, but not in the main part where all the dark wizards skulk about. The place is actually pretty quiet when you get deep into the back alleys. Mostly I just wanted to look around. I ended up stumbling across a small wand shop owned by a retired auror. I talked to the guy for awhile, and we got on pretty well. He let me stay at his place for awhile and taught me some advanced

magic and dueling. When I felt like I had learned enough, he crafted a new wand for me. Here, check it out.”

Harry grabbed his masterpiece wand from his belt and handed it to Ron, who looked decidedly impressed with it.

“Bloody Hell, mate. This is cool. I wish I could get one of these...”

“What’s it made of, Harry?”

Harry turned to Hermione, who had asked the question.

“The wood’s an elder treant core, with a few of my wing feathers suspended in a mixed blood sample from my two pets as a core. The discharge stone is a composite of a sunstone and a moonstone.”

Hermione nodded and asked another question.

“So, where did you get those two animals, anyway?”

“Small exotic pet shop a few blocks from where I was staying. Nobody would buy them because they were regarded as dangerous and expensive to keep, and the shop was going to put them out just to get rid of them. I decided to give them a good home.”

“That was very sweet of you, Harry.”

Harry gave himself a mental pat on the back, having surprised even himself with his ability to improvise a workable story. The two beasts just looked up at him, almost as if offended by his fabricated story. He sent them a quick apology through their mental link.

Ginny asked the next question, at which point Harry was starting to get a bit irritated.

“What are their names?”

“...James and Lily.”

Ginny smiled and nodded, giving the two large cats a quick scratch behind the ears. For his part, Harry wasn't about to admit to naming one of his pets after Lord Grindelwald, and figured that using his parents' names would win him a few easy sympathy points. He turned to Ron.

"Up for a game of chess, mate?"

Ron nodded eagerly, seemingly happy to be leaving the entire subject behind. Harry noticed that his best mate hadn't been completely taken in by his smokescreen, but was thankful that the redhead had chosen not to call his bluff. Ron got his chessboard and set the pieces, while the two girls played with the tigers. Fleur watched Harry and Ron, though she seemed to be focusing on Harry as much as the chessboard, a slightly appreciative expression crossing her beautiful angular face every time she looked at the young dakaathi hybrid. They played a match series of five games, of which Ron won four, easily beating Harry in the first, and having a progressively increasing amount of difficulty, finally losing the last in a war of attrition.

The day progressed uneventfully from there, with the small group engaged mostly in small talk about various subjects. Bill brought the items Harry had asked for at lunch, and told Harry that the bank would be sending official notification of Sirius's will reading the next morning. Harry thankfully went upstairs and changed into his green and white yukata, hiding the firewhisky and potion in a drawer in Ron's bedroom, along with some of the more questionable books in his small collection. Predictably, Hermione raided Harry's books immediately upon seeing the small pile on the floor, asking to borrow a book one of Alphonse's treatises on magical theory. Harry arched an eyebrow, surprised to see her so willing to study something written by a known dark lord, but she didn't seem to notice. She fished a second book from his bag while he wasn't watching and quickly hid it in her robes, a strange gleam in her chocolate brown eyes.

Later in the evening, Hermione and Ginny left for bed, leaving only Harry and Ron up in the latter's room. Fleur had long since gone downstairs, right after Bill had returned from Gringotts earlier in the afternoon. Harry walked over to the drawer and got out his bottle of firewhiskey.

“Oi, Ron. Want something to drink?”

Ron glanced over from the bed, where he was staring up at the ceiling. He raised his eyebrows slightly.

“Firewhiskey? Where’d you get that, Harry? Sure, I’ll take a glass.”

“Picked it up a few weeks ago, but it’s no fun drinking alone.”

Harry grabbed a couple of glass cups that he had sneaked from the kitchen after dinner off of the dresser. He had decided earlier in the day to feel out Ron about possibly joining up with him. He was reluctant at first, knowing his best mate’s volatile temper and fanatical hatred of dark wizards. Hence the Calming Draught. Mixed with the alcohol, it would hopefully mellow him out a little bit, so Harry could get an actual measure of where he stood. Here goes nothing, he thought, slipping a relatively strong sample of the stuff into Ron’s drink before turning and handing it to him.

“Cheers, mate.”

Ron downed his glass quickly, and asked for the bottle. Harry passed it over to him and the redhead refilled his glass.

“Hey, Ron. Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“What do you think about the way Dumbledore’s running this war?”

“Why are you asking me, mate?”

“I dunno. You’re the best chess player I know, and you’ve memorized pretty much every Quidditch tactic in the book. I figure you would know how to manage an army, how to pitch and run a battle. Hermione told me this morning about how the Death Eater attacks are getting more and more frequent, and more people are getting killed. They’re getting bolder, coming out into the open, and the Order never manages to catch any of them. I mean, it’s not like they have

better wizards than us. Hell, most of their best are still in Azkaban from the botched Ministry raid. So, tell me, what gives?"

Harry could see Ron puff up slightly with pride. Starting off by appealing to the often neglected boy's ego was a prudent move. Harry didn't really need Ron's input on the subject at all, as he had already come to his own conclusions, but the youngest male Weasley didn't have to know that. Harry felt bad, at least as much as his dakaathi nature allowed, about having to manipulate his best mate like this, but he genuinely wanted, perhaps needed, Ron on his side in this whole mess. Bill was a close friend and a trusted confidant, but he could never replace Ron, who was in many respects the brother that Harry had never had.

"Honestly, I think Dumbledore isn't fighting the war properly. I mean, the enemy comes out from the shadows, attacks, and disappears. All the Order does is react, mate. There's no way you can beat an enemy like that if you only fight defensively. You've got to find out where they gather and go after them, or lay ambushes and lure them in. As long as they're choosing the battlefields, we can't win. They're the ones fighting attrition. Dumbledore's a bloody great wizard, but he's no general."

Harry nodded, mostly to himself. At least he was willing to admit to Dumbledore's mismanagement of the war. Perhaps this wouldn't be the heated disaster that Harry had initially feared it would be.

"Have you ever tried to talk to somebody about it? I mean, what you're saying makes sense..."

"Why bother? The Order thinks we're a just bunch of useless kids. Didn't we stand in there and fight just like the rest of them at the Ministry? It doesn't matter to them. We're too young, we don't know what we're talking about. Right."

Bitterness, typical Ron, Harry thought. Some things never change.

"So, what about the Ministry? Do you think the professional aurors are any better?"

Ron gulped down another glass of firewhiskey. Harry had barely finished his first.

“Nah, Fudge is an idiot. Dumbledore may not entirely know what he’s doing, but at least he doesn’t get his own people killed. Put Fudge in charge, and we’d just get slaughtered. Besides, the Ministry’s too afraid of losing popular support by really prosecuting a war. Fudge is perfectly happy letting people just read about the attacks in the papers, and once they’re dead, they can’t vote him out of office anyway.”

Sufficiently convinced of his friend's misgivings about the entire war situation, Harry decided to make his initial power play.

“Too bad there isn’t another alternative...”

Ron looked over at Harry.

“What are you getting at, mate?”

Harry slipped off his robe and sat down on the bed, stretching his wings slightly before wrapping them against his body.

“Figured it out, Ron? Let me tell you what I’ve really been up to this past month...”

And so, Harry explained everything to Ron. About his dakaathi heritage, the truth about his great-grandfather, the Shinn Kohaku, his acceptance of Grindelwald’s legacy, his various sexual exploits, his learning to master the Dark Arts. Of course, Harry was prepared to modify his memory if things went poorly, but he wasn't all that worried about the possibility. Harry confided his entire story in his best mate, who looked more and more torn as he continued to listen. Harry understood, knowing that the entire idea of him being truly against Dumbledore was no doubt a cataclysmic shock to Ron.

“...And I need your help to do it, mate.”

The look on Ron's face told Harry that the redhead thought that he had finally lost his marbles.

“Wait a minute, Harry. You say you need my help to fight against Dumbledore and take over the bloody world? Are you out of your mind?”

Harry just looked at him, the mysterious smile from earlier, the very same one that he had picked up from an entire month of observing Hitomi, on his face.

“Out of my mind? Well, let's hope not. But seriously, Ron, think about it for a minute. Voldemort's nothing but a terrorist, and a hypocrite as well. He claims to be fighting for blood supremacy, but he's not a pureblood himself. So what is he really fighting for? Nothing, that's what. He fights only to maim and kill. He's a monster, incapable of leading this world. Then we have the Ministry of Magic, centuries of corruption. Look at your own father. A good man held down by political intrigues, while scum like Fudge and Umbridge drive our society into ruin. Look at your brother Percy. A traitor to his own family, but in a high position in the Ministry as a direct result of it. Need I say anything more? And finally, we have Dumbledore. You pretty much admitted it yourself, he doesn't have what it takes to protect our world anymore. He's completely mismanaged one war, which we only won by virtue of a freak accident, and now he's doing the same with another. I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place, mate, but what has he really done to stop this downward spiral that our world is on?”

Ron couldn't say a word, and just continued to listen.

“Face the facts, Ron, our society is sick and dying. People like Voldemort, and Malfoy, and Bellatrix...they're only the symptoms. The actual disease lies far deeper, in the very corrupt and decadent conditions that spawned them. It's like a cancer, growing and spreading and sucking the very life out of everything that we hold dear. I'm going to take up the sword and hack it all out, mate. People seem to look to me to save our world, and Merlin help me, I'm going to do it. But I can't do it alone. You've always stood by me before, Ron. I'm asking you to do it now. I need a general, somebody that can help me manage the resources that I have. Will you help me?”

Ron stayed silent for several minutes. Harry could see conflicting thoughts and emotions tearing rapidly through his cobalt eyes. Still, his facial expression betrayed an increasingly hard determination building in the youngest male Weasley, as his infamous temper began to likewise boil up in righteous fury, even through the sedative effects of the firewhiskey and potion. Harry unconsciously gripped his wand tighter, preparing for the worst. He was most pleasantly surprised.

"I'll do it. Bloody Hell, Harry, I'm half convinced that you're completely barmy, but I'll do it."

Quite the coup, Harry thought, winning over perhaps the most vehement dark wizard hater this side of the late Bartemius Crouch. Ron, aside from being somebody that Harry really didn't want to have to fight against, would prove useful. He wasn't particularly intelligent in the traditional sense, but had a brilliant mind for tactical dispositions, a savant if there ever was one. He was likewise a far cry from being a magically powerful wizard, but he had an inherent fanaticism and a willingness to do the dirtiest work that combined to potentially make him extremely dangerous when properly provoked. He would make for a perfect deputy. Harry smiled genuinely, for the first time since being with Hitomi.

"I knew I was making the right choice in trusting you, mate."

"What about the others, Harry? Hermione, I mean, and my other brothers and Ginny? Are you going to tell them about all this?"

"Yeah, eventually, but I wanted to let you know first. Get some sleep, Ron. We'll talk more tomorrow. I want to get your input on some ideas I have."

"Right. G'night, Harry."

Harry nodded and left for an empty room across the hall, leaving Ron to ponder exactly what he had just committed himself to.

(End Chapter Nine)

Author's Note: Well, next chapter's done. One more at Grimmauld Place, and we're on the Hogwarts Express in Chapter Eleven. As you can see, I've decided to place Ron on Harry's side. I just don't buy into the whole jealous prat thing, sorry. Yeah, Ron had a low point in Goblet of Fire, but I think he more than redeemed himself in Order of the Phoenix. Besides, he serves a purpose for me. I need Harry to have somebody constantly around who is good at looking at things from a logistic and tactical perspective, and who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Ron's not a great or powerful wizard, but he makes for a good enforcer. I'm inclined to place Ginny in Harry's camp also, but we'll see next chapter.

“What about the others, Harry? Hermione, I mean, and my other brothers and Ginny? Are you going to tell them about all this?”

“Yeah, eventually, but I wanted to let you know first. Get some sleep, Ron. We’ll talk more tomorrow. I want to get your input on some ideas I have.”

“Right. G’night, Harry.”

Harry nodded and left for an empty room across the hall, leaving Ron to ponder exactly what he had just committed himself to.

Chapter Ten: Raising the Red Army – To Gringotts Again

Preliminary Author's Note: After some consideration, I've decided to move this into the Harry/Cho section, as that will be a part of my main pairing design. I've more or less decided that Harry will have two main partners, and anybody who's been reading and paying attention can probably figure out where I'm going. There will still be other girls on the outside, for various reasons, but none of those will really develop into anything beyond sex. For whatever Harry/Cho fans start reading because of that pairing, I will be getting a start on it within the next three chapters or so. Enjoy, everybody.

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry woke early the next morning, having spent several hours after leaving Ron’s room absorbed in thought. Pleased with his success in talking over his volatile best mate, he decided to approach his other friends soon. Ginny would be first, as Harry felt rather confident in his ability to win her over. After all, the darkness had already touched her soul once before, and aside from that, she owed Harry a life bond from the Chamber of Secrets episode, though had no intention of using it to force her over to his side. He had no need for unwilling allies. As for Hermione, she would be much more difficult. Harry had managed to get past Ron’s prejudices by stroking his ego, but the female member of the Golden Trio was far too clever to fall for such a device.

Deciding that he wasn't going to get any more sleep that night, Harry casually brightened up his room with a quick flick of his masterpiece wand. His control over his magical core had slowly progressed during his training in the village to the point that he was now capable of invoking small bits of magic without any need for an incantation, though the skill was rather limited in its use. He stretched his wings slightly and got out of bed, intent on a hot shower.

Once showered and dried, Harry returned to his room, slipped on a gold yukata with sapphire blue print, donned a pair of straw sandals that had somehow ended up in his bag from the village, and headed downstairs, hoping to perhaps find somebody awake. After all, Grimmauld Place was the Order's headquarters, and never really fell asleep. Grindelwald and Khariana remained sleeping on the floor at the foot of Harry's bed. Downstairs, Harry saw that the place was mostly darkened, likely indicating no significant movements from Voldemort. Only a small study in an obscure corner of the rear lounge was brightened. Harry crept over to investigate, discovering a certain muggleborn witch poring over one of his rare Dark Arts books. With a flare of indignation, Harry realized that she must have stolen it from his bags while his attention was diverted elsewhere. Still, the fact that she had it in her possession now at least indicated that she hadn't gone running to Dumbledore. Harry filed that fact away for the moment.

"Studying hard, Hermione?"

A look of abject terror crossed Hermione's face upon the realization that she wasn't alone. She quickly and quietly closed the book and placed it down at her side, obscuring the title with her hand. Looking up hesitantly, she flushed a bit at the sight of Harry's forest green eyes looking down at her with amusement.

"H-Harry, what are you doing awake so early? You nearly scared me to death!"

"Just couldn't sleep. So, what are you up to at this hour? We still have a month left before school, you know. No need to pull all night homework sessions yet."

“Oh, I wasn’t doing homework. I was just looking over some advanced transfigurations. The Black library has some of the most wonderful books, Harry. Of course, Dumbledore made sure that all the Dark Arts texts were removed before he would let me go in. I don’t understand some of this stuff, though. I’m probably going to ask McGonagall to help me with it later.”

“Can I take a look? My dad was great at Transfiguration, you know.”

Hermione suddenly became very interested in the floor.

“I can’t, Harry. Dumbledore made me promise not to let anybody else use these materials without his permission. We’ll ask him if you can go down and pick out a few books when he gets here this morning, okay?”

Harry arched an eyebrow, adding another bullet to his mental list of Hermione’s erratic patterns of behavior over the course of the past day. She had seemed less than sincere when defending the old man’s incalculable methods previously, but now she was using his name and authority to cover a blatant lie. She had quite willingly asked to borrow one of Grindelwald’s tomes, but then quietly stole an equally questionable book from Harry’s stash soon after. Something was up with her, and he couldn’t quite figure out what it was.

For the time being, Harry decided to keep his distance from Hermione concerning the subject. He could tell that she had some conflicting issues to resolve, but attempting to interfere would only push her away. The corrupt and unqualified authority of the Ministry, by which Hermione had been directly oppressed during the previous term at Hogwarts, had seemingly shaken her blind trust in authority figures, leaving her unsure of herself. Harry could sympathize, but wanted to get her away from her books for a while and talk to her.

“Sure, I’d appreciate that. So, want to go grab a bite to eat? I’m famished.”

Hermione smiled, though Harry could see an underlying feeling of uneasiness darting through in her eyes. His changes had obviously rattled her just as much as they had Dumbledore, and she wasn’t

quite sure what to make of the “new” Harry. One thing was for certain, the dakaathi charm had taken its hold on her as well. The flush that crossed her face when Harry had made his presence known still remained.

“That would be great, Harry. I’ve been sitting down here for hours, and I’m due for a short break. There still ought to be sandwiches and a few bottles of butterbeer left over from lunchtime.”

Harry led the way into the kitchen, as Hermione reached into the small icebox in the corner and withdrew a half-empty platter of sandwiches. Harry grabbed four bottles of butterbeer, thanking himself for not having imbibed too heavily of the firewhiskey with Ron earlier. The redhead would be waking up with a nasty hangover. As they ate, Harry and Hermione chatted about more mundane topics, such as study plans for the next year and the goings on around Grimmauld Place. He told her that he intended to start taking his studies a bit more seriously this year, but that he would likely drop Snape’s class.

Harry briefly asked about Lupin, wondering why he hadn’t seen the old werewolf around the previous day. Hermione told him sadly that Lupin had savagely mauled Kreacher during one of his last werewolf transformation, despite the taming influence of the Wolfsbane Potion, and that Dumbledore had sent him away on a mission to try to convince some of the werewolf packs to join hands with the Order. Harry harbored some suspicion that Snape had purposely botched the potion in hopes of being able to rid himself of the last of the Marauders, but kept the thought to himself.

Of greater interest to Harry was the slight reproving tone his friend had taken upon describing Lupin’s departure. She didn’t support what he had done, as she had always been an advocate of that traitorous old house elf, but she also seemed rather displeased at the old man for sending Lupin away when he needed emotional support. Losing Sirius had hit the old werewolf hard, and Harry’s sudden disappearance only made matters worse. Perhaps Hermione wasn’t as staunchly in Dumbledore’s camp as Harry had originally thought, but still, he wasn’t ready to approach her yet. The lingering doubt that

Harry had seen in her eyes back in the study slowly subsided as they spoke.

Soon enough, the sun began to poke through the windows at Grimmauld Place, and the house's occupants slowly rose for the new day. Hermione rose from the table and gave Harry a friendly hug, saying that she appreciated the company, but wanted to get back to her studies. Harry decided to let her hold onto the stolen book for awhile, seeing as it contained only basic Dark Arts, and wouldn't be sorely missed should something happen to it. Besides, letting her fall into studying the darker side of magic would help to drive a wedge between Hermione and her revered authority figures, which suited his purposes. Perhaps he would accidentally leave a few things lying about where she would be sure to happen upon them.

Bill was the first person to come downstairs for the morning, looking not in the least disheveled as he took a seat across from Harry.

"Morning, Harry."

"Morning, Bill. Didn't sleep well at all last night."

"Happens sometimes. If you haven't been sleeping, what have you been doing. Love the robes, by the way. You look good in gold."

Harry smirked slightly.

"Thanks, and I haven't been up to much. I've mostly been talking to Hermione. She just went back into the rear study. I don't think she's slept."

Bill nodded.

"Yeah, come to think, she's been acting rather oddly as of late. I mean, I haven't really known Hermione, though I've picked up that she's always been a bit of a bookworm. Still, she rarely ever stops reading these days. She's been spending less and less time with Ron and Ginny, and doesn't seem to trust anybody. I imagine she only went upstairs yesterday for an opportunity to interrogate you."

Harry lounged back slightly in his chair, taking a quick glance around to make sure nobody else was approaching.

“That’s not the half of it. She was reading one of my Dark Arts books, one that she took from my bag without asking. I asked her what she was reading, and she lied to me. Still, I dragged her off into the kitchen for awhile, and she seemed to warm up after a little small talk.”

Bill arched an eyebrow.

“Dark Arts? Well, that’s certainly unexpected. Dumbledore wouldn’t be pleased if he found out.”

The smirk remained on Harry’s face.

“Exactly, which is why I fully intend to encourage her extracurricular studies. I’m sure that if I accidentally leave things sitting around for her, she’ll take advantage. I’ll just have to keep an eye on her from a distance. I don’t want to turn her into our generation’s answer to Bellatrix Lestrange, after all.”

At his mention of that name, Harry closed his eyes slightly, indulging in a quick fantasy of ripping the insane Death Eater’s entrails out and feeding them to the tigers. Still, he was worried about Hermione, and mentally vowed to look out for her.

“That’s not a bad idea, Harry. So, did you enjoy that firewhiskey?”

“Yeah, though I doubt Ron will be when he wakes up. The bloke finished off about three quarters of the bottle.”

“I’d better go whip him up a Hangover Potion, then. Mum will skin him alive if she finds out he’s been drinking. Why did you let him have it, anyway? Trying to loosen him up and talk him over or something?”

Bill’s facial expression indicated that it was meant to be a joke, but looked curious when the younger wizard kept a serious expression.

“That’s exactly what I did, and it paid off. He’s in.”

“Are you sure we can trust him? I mean, he’s my brother and all, but I have a hard time seeing him going against our parents and Dumbledore...”

“I’ve been dealing with Ron for a long time. I believe him.”

Bill nodded in acceptance, and Harry continued to talk.

“So, you and Fleur, you’re serious?”

Bill smiled slightly, and Harry was instantly glad that he hadn’t responded to the French sex kitten’s playful teasing the previous morning. She was beautiful, no doubt, but he wasn’t about to alienate the man who had recently come to be one of his closest friends over a brief adventure underneath her robes. There were plenty of other women.

“Yeah, we are. We’ve been together for just over a year now. It’s odd, you know? She’s not the type of girl that I ever envisioned myself ending up with, but nowadays I couldn’t imagine myself with anybody else. Anyway, she’s gone back to France for a long weekend. Says she’s missed her folks.”

“Well, I’m happy for you two. Going to ask her the big question anytime soon?”

“At Yule, if all goes according to plan.”

“She’d be lucky to have you.”

Bill smiled a bit.

“Well, I’m certainly glad one of us thinks so. I’d better go brew that potion for Ickle Ronniekins.”

Bill left, and Harry went upstairs to rearrange his things. Neither of them had noticed a certain redhead eavesdropping on their entire conversation from the middle of the stairs.

After organizing his possessions in what would be his bedroom for the remainder of the summer, Harry returned downstairs, shadowed by his two pets. He found Mrs. Weasley cooking breakfast in the kitchen. After the usual exchange of morning pleasantries, Harry ventured into the sitting room, where Ron was seated on a couch.

"Morning, mate. How's the hangover?"

Ron glanced over and shot Harry a grin.

"You know, if you and Bill hadn't become such good friends, I think he'd have probably let me puke my bloody guts up just to teach me a lesson."

"Probably. I hope your mum finishes with breakfast soon. I just ate a few hours ago, and I'm already hungry again. You know, I think I'm starting to understand what it's like to be you."

Ron laughed loudly and then turned to Harry with a serious look.

"Harry, did we really have that entire conversation last night, or was it just some weird dream of mine?"

Harry fixed his friend with an appraising look.

"It was no dream, Ron. Why, having second thoughts now?"

Ron shook his head in the negative.

"Nah, just making sure..."

The redhead was interrupted by the sound of his mother calling the house in to breakfast. Almost as if synchronized, the two young wizards darted for the kitchen, finding Arthur and Ginny already seated at the long table. For some reason, Ginny kept staring directly at Harry with an unreadable expression. He met her gaze for a moment, but turned away at the sight of Hermione coming in from the study. Taking a closer look, he saw bags under the young witch's eyes. She looked like Hell. She did brighten a bit, smiling as she took a seat next to Ginny. As the eight o'clock hour approached, Order

members began to pop into the house like so many fireflies and the entire room filled with loud conversation. Harry tried to tune the majority of it out as he and Ron had a short contest to see which of the two could inhale the most sausage and scrambled eggs. The tall redhead remained champion, if such a title existed, but Harry gave him a good run for his money.

Quickly enough, breakfast ended, and a good number of the assembled Order members left to pursue their daily tasks. Glancing at the far end of the table, Harry spied Mad-Eye looking in his direction with a contemplative expression. Dumbledore must not have told the rest of the Order about Harry's wings, though Moody would be able to see them through his yukata. Looking down at himself, Harry briefly decided that he needed a katana to complete the look. He noticed Hermione and Ginny carrying on a conversation, which pleased him somewhat. He still wasn't sure when had brought on Hermione's sudden tendency to isolate herself, but he was certain that it wasn't good for her to be completely shut in with her book, especially if she was dabbling in Dark Arts.

Harry's good temper was quickly soured, however, as a certain bearded Headmaster strode into the room, looking sickeningly resplendent in robes of lime green and carrying a trio of envelopes. He could feel almost Ron's irritation flaring up beside him as well. His mate's dissatisfaction with the old man was apparently something that had been brewing for awhile. Either that, or Harry had really awakened something within his mind during that one conversation. Albus smiled serenely at the small group of students.

"Good morning, children. I think that some of you will be pleased, or perhaps terrified, to know that your OWL scores have been released. Rather than tire out a set of perfectly good post owls, I have decided to deliver them to you personally."

Hermione's eyes lit up at this piece of news. Harry glanced over at her with a bit of amusement. Again, he thought, some things never change. Dumbledore handed Harry his envelope, which he quickly opened. Skimming over the pointless introductory paragraph from the people at the Ministry, Harry looked down to the actual scores.

OWL Results for: Potter, Harry James

All scores are given as a percentage.

Potions: Professor Severus Snape

Theory: 43 (Poor)

Practical: 59 (Acceptable)

Overall Rating: Acceptable, one OWL awarded

Transfiguration: Professor Minerva McGonagall

Theory: 72 (Exceeds Expectations)

Practical: 85 (Exceeds Expectations)

Overall Rating: Exceeds Expectations, one OWL awarded

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Professor Dolores Umbridge

Theory: 99 (Outstanding)

Practical: 103 (Outstanding)

Overall Rating: Outstanding, two OWL's awarded

Charms: Professor Filius Flitwick

Theory: 84 (Exceeds Expectations)

Practical: 97 (Outstanding)

Overall Rating: Outstanding, two OWL's awarded

Care of Magical Creatures: Professor Rubeus Hagrid

Theory: 68 (Acceptable)

Practical: 76 (Exceeds Expectations)

Overall Rating: Exceeds Expectations, one OWL awarded

Herbology: Professor Fiona Sprout

Theory: 60 (Acceptable)

Practical: 67 (Acceptable)

Overall Rating: Acceptable, one OWL awarded

Divination: Professor Sibyll Trelawney, Professor Firenze

Theory: 17 (Dreadful)

Practical: 49 (Acceptable)

Overall Rating: Poor, no OWL awarded

Astronomy: Professor Clara Sinistra

Theory: 45 (Poor)

Practical: 71 (Exceeds Expectations)

Overall Rating Acceptable, one OWL awarded

History of Magic: Professor Mortimer Binns

Written Examination: 11 (Dreadful)

Overall Rating: Dreadful, no OWL awarded

Due to an unscheduled interruption of the Astronomy practical, all scores have been curved to the minimum point requirement of the next level up from the raw grade.

Total OWL's awarded: 9

Again, Harry ignored the congratulatory paragraph at the end, instead choosing to reflect on his scores. He wasn't particularly surprised by anything, except that he had somehow passed the Divination practical. His mediocre performance in Potions meant that he would likely have to endure some degree of taunting from the greasy bastard, not that he had any intention of taking Snape's class regardless. He was pleased with his Charms score, but not so much with his Herbology mark.

Ron looked impassive as he glanced at his scores, while Hermione was about to burst with barely concealed glee. The former looked over to Harry, while Dumbledore took a seat and observed.

"How'd you do, mate?"

"Nine, O's in DADA and Charms, and failed Divination and History of Magic. How about you?"

Ron shrugged.

"Here, take a look."

Ron passed his result sheet over to Harry. Well, Harry thought, Molly wouldn't be having a fourth Head Boy in the family. Weasley, Ronald Bilius had earned five total OWL's, with an Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and passes in Charms, Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Still, he had some near passes in other subjects, namely Transfiguration and Astronomy. Harry gave Ron a reassuring pat on the shoulder and passed his sheet back to him, fully aware of his reluctance to discuss the matter out loud. There would no doubt

be worse scores than five, but telling him so wasn't likely to improve his disposition. As for himself, Harry didn't particularly care. He would be on the fields of battle within the year, and had no intentions of being around Hogwarts by graduation time.

Meanwhile, Hermione was glancing apprehensively between Harry and Ron, willing them to ask her about her scores. With the slightest roll of his forest green eyes, Harry turned to his female friend.

"And how about you, Hermione?"

The girl literally beamed, a fact that Harry thought was almost worth having to stomach her forthcoming gushing. Still, he supposed she had a right to be proud of her accomplishments.

"Nineteen, Harry. Nineteen OWL's. All my hard work paid off. I'm so happy!"

Harry forced a smile onto his face, while Ron turned his head to the floor, trying not to say anything to rain on her parade.

"Wow, that's great, Hermione. Straight O's, I take it?"

She simply nodded and turned to Dumbledore, already intent on discussing her course options for the upcoming term. Harry decided to take advantage of Dumbledore's preoccupation and head back upstairs with Ron, hoping to avoid an unnecessary question and answer session with the old man.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was having a most difficult week. Minister Fudge had been giving him no end of annoyance about finding Harry Potter. Cornelius had seemingly changed his position on the boy overnight after the Department of Mysteries episode, now believing him to be the savior of the wizarding world, and somebody he looked to "as if he were his own son". Albus sincerely hoped that Harry would never catch wind of that comment, as the results would likely be most unpleasant. And, indeed, Harry was at the source of his own difficulties as well. He had disregarded both his own safety and that of his relatives by leaving Privet Drive, and had subsequently disappeared for a month, grinding the Order's operations to a

standstill as they searched for the boy around the clock. Thankfully, he had just recently turned up at Headquarters, but not before assaulting Severus with a borderline illegal dark curse, rendering him unconscious and in need of medical treatment.

And that presented yet another problem. Severus's resentment towards Harry would no doubt be greater than ever after this latest encounter. Albus was becoming rather annoyed with having to referee between the two, and found himself tempted to simply allow them to have it out and settle it once and for all. Still, judging by the degree of power he had felt from Harry's curse in Diagon Alley, he doubted that there would be much remaining of his Potions professor and spy should that happen.

Most worrisome for Albus was the fact that Harry had been revealed to be the blood heir of Lord Grindelwald, and the new lord of the Evans line. He was not happy to see Harry with that degree of political clout and financial independence, not that the old man was aware of him having made any significant use of either. He wasn't ready to handle the level of responsibility, especially since the boy already had the Prophecy and his godfather's untimely demise to cope with. Still, he had succeeded to the lordship, and there was little that Dumbledore could do but accept that fact now. Also, Harry had recently sprouted a mysterious pair of wings, that Albus could only assume were of veela origin. That news was of no particular concern, as Dumbledore wasn't worried about the boy sowing his oats among the female population of Hogwarts. Perhaps some attention from the opposite sex would even help to calm Harry's volatile temper to a degree.

For now, Dumbledore fully intended to get the story behind his favorite student's disappearance. He had left the previous morning in order to ponder these recent developments, but was now prepared to deal with Harry. Albus kept an eye on the young wizard as he attempted to field young Miss Granger's questions about the upcoming term. He had also been concerned about the girl's increasing tendency to withdraw from her friends. At least she seemed back to her normal self, at least for the time being. Harry's return had no doubt contributed to that. Albus felt that the boy had no idea how important he was to those around him, and not just as the

hero of the wizarding world. That was simply all the more reason to protect him. Oh, and now he and young Ronald Weasley were rising to leave the room.

“Harry, I believe that we still need to have a discussion?”

Albus watched as Harry returned to his seat, no visible reaction on his face. That fact alone troubled the Headmaster. Harry’s thoughts had always been quite visible, so much that he really had no need to employ Legilimency in order to be able to read him. Now, however, he was able to keep a straight face that would make any Slytherin envious.

“Of course, professor. I almost forgot.”

“Very well. I see no reason why your friends cannot remain here. I’m certain that you have already told them of your whereabouts this past month. Now, would you mind telling me the story as well, Harry?”

Harry only shrugged slightly. Albus listened as he relayed a tale of staying with a retired auror in Knockturn Alley that was currently in the business of crafting wands. If Harry’s story was to be believed, he had learned advanced spell work and dueling technique during his unexpected hiatus. Apparently, he had been given a new wand as well, one crafted especially to be compatible with his own magical signature. That was the likely source of his increased magical power from his encounter with Severus. For some reason, Alastor decided to interject himself into the discussion.

“A retired auror, you say? What was his name, laddie?”

Harry glanced over at Moody, who was taking a swig from his hip flask.

“Alberto Rodriguez. Do you know him, Professor Moody?”

Moody spat up his drink all over the table. Thankfully, Albus mused, most of the Order had left, leaving Alastor more or less alone at the far end of the room. Moody spoke in a low growl that could barely be discerned.

“Aye, laddie, that I do. A damn good auror, he was, but mind that you don’t end up like him. Still, if he taught you how to fight, then you had a damn good teacher. And you say he’s crafting wands now?”

“Yeah, he helped craft this for me.”

Harry lazily drew his masterpiece wand from the waistband of his yukata and exhibited it. Albus couldn’t help but admire its quality, but also realized that it probably didn’t have the standard Ministry detection charms. Even so, Harry was now a legal adult, meaning that the underage sorcery laws didn’t apply to him. Dumbledore resolved to fine tune the detection wards at Hogwarts, and attempt to key them to target Harry’s magical signature. He had already used one dark curse on a faculty member, albeit outside of school, and if Albus remembered the circumstances of Alberto Rodriguez’s dismissal from the auror force, the man had likely taught Harry many others. Albus vowed to be more vigilant concerning Harry, and to guide him and ensure that he did not stray. He would not allow a second Tom Riddle to pass through Hogwarts on his watch. Yet, Harry was the only hope of the light.

“That is a most beautiful wand, Harry. Now, about returning you to Pri...”

Albus was not going to attempt to send Harry back to Privet Drive. He had no doubts that the goblins had already informed Harry of his newfound adult status, being the staunch supporters of his ancestor that they were. Dumbledore had been pleasantly surprised to hear that they had not corrupted Harry with skewed interpretations of Grindelwald’s story. Perhaps they were unwilling to alienate the hero of the light by telling him of his connection to a dark lord. Regardless, Albus had no actual authority over Harry, at least until the start of term, and not provoking an unnecessary clash with the boy would be the most prudent course. The loss of the blood protection would be regrettable, but there seemed to be no help for it. The Headmaster was snapped out of his thoughts by the arrival of a spotted owl bearing a letter for Harry. Albus folded his hands while Harry read, and accepted the letter as the young wizard wordlessly passed it over for his inspection.

Greetings, Lord Evans:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the reading of the last will and testament of Sirius Orion Black, of whose estate you have been named a beneficiary, will take place on 31 July, at ten o'clock sharp. The presence of your lordship is required. Please be prompt, and dress formally if possible. You need only ask the goblin at the front desk to escort you to the reading. You have our condolences for your recent loss.

Sincerely,

Department of Probate

Gringotts Wizard Bank: Diagon Alley Main Branch

Albus sighed inwardly, knowing that this was inevitable. After all, Harry had already been contacted by the bank once and told of his status as Sirius's heir. This letter was only a formality. He was particularly dismayed to notice that the goblins had addressed Harry by his official title. He supposed that he had no choice but to allow Harry to attend the reading, as loath as he was to allow him even greater status within wizarding society. Harry needed to be kept under control, both for his own good and for that of the entire wizarding world. His potential political clout was growing to be too much for Albus to be able to realistically keep a handle on, and it would only become greater when he came into the lordship of the Potter line as well.

"I see, Harry. Of course, you will be attending the reading, as is your duty as your godfather's invested heir. However, I would ask that you allow me to be present as well, in order to act as your advocate. These political intrigues can be quite messy, you know."

Albus saw a brief flash of something cross Harry's eyes, but he quickly nodded congenially. For not the first time since yesterday, Dumbledore couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed at his refusal to make eye contact. A quick Legilimency scan would make solving the mysteries of this new Harry Potter much simpler.

"Of course, Professor. I would appreciate that."

“Then it is settled, Harry. Since I am certain that the Weasleys and Miss Granger have not yet gone shopping for the upcoming term, perhaps we should all schedule the day for Diagon Alley. Does that meet with your approval, Molly?”

The plump Weasley matriarch smiled happily.

“Of course, Headmaster. That would be perfect.”

“Very well, then. I shall be off. Do not concern yourself with returning to Privet Drive, Harry. I see no reason why you should return now. Just relax and enjoy the remainder of your summer. I have a conference to attend for a few days, but I shall see you all on Tuesday morning.”

Harry watched as the old man again strode out of the room. Petting Grindelwald and Khariana, he wondered why Dumbledore had failed to mention them during the rather annoying inquisition. Surely he was able to see them, as large as they were. Well, he thought, no use worrying about it. He waited until he was certain that the old man was gone and headed back up to his room, rather suddenly feeling extremely sleepy.

Harry slept well past lunch, and only awoke due to a soft knocking on his door well into the afternoon. Sitting up, Harry stretched his wings slightly and yawned.

“Door’s open. Come on in.”

Half-expecting Ron, he was a bit surprised to find that his visitor was...

“Ginny. Can I do something for you?”

The Weasley girl walked over to the foot of Harry’s bed and sat down, looking at him with the same unreadable expression from breakfast.

“What are you up to, Harry?”

The immediately put him on the defensive. He slowly inched his hand toward his wand as he answered.

“Well, I was sleeping until just a second ago...”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Harry! I overheard you and Bill this morning in the kitchen.”

“Did you, now? And what exactly did you overhear?”

“Enough to know that you’re not on Professor Dumbledore’s side in this war, and that Bill and Ron are both in on whatever you’re planning. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry smirked slightly and made a move to cut off any escape attempt. Ginny blushed slightly at the look on his face, but made no effort to run away from him.

“Because I hadn’t gotten around to it yet. You were next on my list, just so you know.”

Ginny smiled slightly.

“That’s good to hear. So, what’re you planning to do?”

Harry shrugged.

“First, I’m going to see Voldemort dead. Then, I’m going to take the fight to the Ministry, and to Dumbledore if he gets in the way. I’m going to take over the government and fix the abuses that have turned our society into shit. I’ll finish what Lord Grindelwald started, as sure as his ring rests upon my finger. But for now, I’m going to keep gathering followers and supplies and exploit my information network, and plan for a way to destabilize Hogwarts from the inside. Maybe I’ll kill off a few Voldemort supporters inside the school. Really, I’ll act as circumstances dictate. Yeah, Ron and Bill are on my side, but they aren’t the only ones. So, how about you?”

“I’m going to help, obviously. Do you really think I would have come to you if I had planned to do anything else? I’m not stupid, Harry.”

Harry arched an eyebrow.

“Just like that? I tell you that I’m going to start a war and kill people, and you don’t even want to consider staying out of it?”

“I owe you my life, Harry. I know you wouldn’t try to force me to join you because of that, but a life debt is not something to be forgotten. I have my pride, you know. And besides, you’re right. Something needs to be done about the Ministry, and Dumbledore obviously isn’t going to do it...”

“Well, I’m glad you agree, Gin. I didn’t want to have to fight you in the end, and I know your brothers feel the same way.”

“So, I take it from what I heard this morning that I’m not the only one that’s noticed something off with Hermione this summer? Do you know anything about that, Harry?”

“Not much, you probably overheard everything I know, other than that she doesn’t seem to trust anybody right now. She seemed to get back to normal a bit when the OWL results came in this morning, though.”

“That’s only a temporary fix. She’s been acting weird ever since the Department of Mysteries, now that I think about it. Almost getting killed must have really messed with her head.”

Harry thought back to the battle at the end of the previous term, when Antonin Dolohov had lashed Hermione with a fiery whip of dark magic, indeed very nearly killing her. Of course that was what had had her systems fried. It didn’t change his plans for dealing with her, though. Harry fully intended to let her work out her issues, and then she would choose where she wanted to align herself. Hermione was easily perceptive enough to figure out that Harry was up to something sooner or later. When that time came, she would either come to him or go to the old man, and that would answer Harry’s doubts one way or the other. Harry nodded to Ginny.

“I could imagine so...”

Eventually, Ron came back upstairs as well, after finishing off three helpings at lunch. Harry and the two Weasley siblings made small talk, as Ron smiled a bit proudly at hearing that his little sister had gotten in on the grand scheme. Eventually, talk turned to such subjects Quidditch and plans for the year's Gryffindor team, and academic plans. Soon enough, a pair of familiar owls came, the first being Pig, carrying a letter for Ginny from her boyfriend, Harry's Gryffindor classmate Dean Thomas. Ron's ears reddened a bit at the sight of Dean sending love letters to his sister, but he wisely kept quiet. The other owl was Harry's own Hedwig, apparently bearing Hogwarts letters for him, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Harry supposed that she had been taken to the school after the Weasleys left the Burrow for the summer, and now Dumbledore was returning her to her rightful master. Suddenly, he recalled his need to owl Grilthauk concerning the entire Narcissa Malfoy affair. Hedwig didn't seem to be too angry with him, somehow knowing that he really wasn't able to come back for her, and gladly took his scribbled note to Gringotts. Harry tossed the other letters onto the bed and opened his own.

It was only the standard letter from McGonagall detailing the books he would need for the upcoming term, along with his course options for the remaining two years. The letter also came with a parchment on which to select his schedule, requiring that he take as many core subjects at the NEWT as that he was eligible for, up to a bare minimum of three. For the rest, he could choose from several advanced elective courses that were only offered to sixth and seventh year students. Harry absentmindedly chose to continue his studies in DADA, Charms and Transfiguration. Herbology wasn't worth bothering with, and Astronomy was completely useless. On a second thought, he also signed up for Care of Magical Creatures, knowing that Hagrid would be heartbroken if he didn't. He also signed up for a course in muggle weapons training, and one in stealth and tracking. The former might prove useful, and the latter would be a breeze after his training with the Shinn Kohaku. That brought his load up to the minimum of six courses, and he really didn't want to bother with more classes than he had to take. He had better things to do with his time than sit around learning useless information.

The days passed idly, with no particular incident. Voldemort was apparently keeping quiet after losing most of his Inner Circle at the Department of Mysteries, and had stopped trying to send Harry

dreams. The last the young dakaathi hybrid had experienced was another hazy episode, after a particularly intense session one night with his kunoichi companion in the village. Harry had intentionally left a book with some nastier dark curses sitting on a small table in the upstairs hallway and found it missing later in the day. Close by, his previous tome had turned up mysteriously, indicating that Hermione had finished with it. She was playing a dangerous game, Harry thought. Still, he had also delved rather deep into the Dark Arts, more or less unsupervised, over the course of his month in the village.

Quickly enough, Harry's birthday came along, and the morning saw Harry, Hermione and the Weasleys assembled in the sitting room of Grimmauld place waiting for Dumbledore. Harry was dressed in his black formal robe and had his wings folded up against himself, not caring to draw any more attention than necessary. Surely enough, the Headmaster apparated into the room as promised, dressed garishly enough to draw more than enough attention for the both of them. The old man surveyed the group with twinkling eyes.

"Are we ready to depart? We shall be going to Diagon Alley by Portkey this morning."

Molly Weasley answered for the entire body.

"Whenever you're ready, Headmaster."

With a nod and a smile, which Hermione returned, as did Harry, albeit forced, Dumbledore held out an old pair of socks. Ron and Ginny kept their faces impassive as they grabbed the offending footwear, followed by the rest of the group. Harry felt that familiar tug behind his navel, and quickly found himself outside in front of the main entrance to Gringotts. Albus placed a gnarled hand on Harry's shoulders and turned to Hermione and the Weasleys.

"Please, retrieve your gold from the bank and feel free to commence your shopping while Harry and I are at the reading. We shall meet you for lunch in the Leaky Cauldron at noon and continue as a group from there. Do not be concerned with security, as I have already seen fit to double the Order presence within the alley for the duration of our visit. Now, perhaps we should get a move on, Harry."

Harry simply nodded and smiled to the rest of the group.

“We’ll see you lot at lunch. By the way, I have an order to pick up at the robe shop, so can we all wait and go there after the reading?”

Molly gave Harry a warm smile of her own in response.

“Of course, Harry. We’ll wait. Now go on, you wouldn’t want to be late.”

With that, Harry turned and strode into the bank, intentionally slowing his pace to allow the old man to keep up. As much as he didn’t appreciate Dumbledore’s meddling, he did see some advantage to having him along today. Harry knew that there would likely be some less than savory characters at this gathering. Narcissa and her worthless son would most certainly be there, along with a smattering of other Voldemort sympathizers. With a small mental sneer, Harry reflected on the fact that he could easily handle them well enough on his own, and two small pops from behind him indicated that his two tiger guardians had chosen to follow him along as well. Still, none would dare make a hostile move with Albus Dumbledore present, and Harry would prefer to avoid an unnecessary fight. The pair soon reached the front desk, but were immediately served, leaving no need to ring. Harry was a bit pleased to notice that Griphook would be their guide.

“Ah, young Lord Evans. It’s a pleasure. What can Gringotts do for you today?”

Harry could almost feel the old man’s grimace upon hearing his honorific, and the fact gave him no small amount of vindictive pleasure.

“Headmaster Dumbledore and I are here for the reading of the Black testament. Could you show us the way, Griphook?”

The goblin grinned and nodded.

“Of course, Lord Evans. It pleases me that you still remember my name after so many years. Right this way, please.”

With a nod, Harry followed Griphook, as did Albus. They hadn't far to walk, as a quick trek down a carpeted hallway led them to the room in which the reading was scheduled to take place. Griphook pushed open the double doors and motioned for the two to enter. Paying no mind to the gathered crowd of lesser beneficiaries, Harry took his indicated place at the head of the long table, as the old man conjured a cushy armchair and sat down to his immediate right. It was time for the investiture of the Black estate.

(End Chapter Ten)

Author's Note: Here's the tenth installment of this increasingly long saga. First, about the phantom chapter ten fiasco from earlier, that was an author's note that I had posted to notify readers of the chapter nine rewrite. I deleted it soon after, not wanting to see my story banned. Not much action here, I know, but now that I'm through most of the important conversations before Hogwarts, we're finally about ready to get down to business. Still, I think I got through some important stuff in this chapter, providing further insight onto the whole Hermione situation, Dumbledore's thoughts on the new Harry, and Ginny's addition to Harry's small army of supporters. Next chapter will be the will reading, obviously, a small bit of shopping, Harry's birthday party, a summary passage of the last month of break, another encounter with Narcissa, and we'll be aboard the Hogwarts Express to end the chapter.

Again, thank you for all the input. I'm ecstatic with the level of reader interaction I'm getting from this story. I hope that I'll get as much feedback for this one, though I'm not going to ask any particular questions this time. I want to know what you guys and girls feel about any particular subject in the story. I hope to get the next chapter out a bit faster than this one came along, so look for it around Friday evening, or sometime Saturday at the latest. Keep reviewing, everybody!

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The goblin grinned and nodded.

“Of course, Lord Evans. It pleases me that you still remember my name after so many years. Right this way, please.”

With a nod, Harry followed Griphook, as did Albus. They hadn't far to walk, as a quick trek down a carpeted hallway led them to the room in which the reading was scheduled to take place. Griphook pushed open the double doors and motioned for the two to enter. Paying no mind to the gathered crowd of lesser beneficiaries, Harry took his indicated place at the head of the long table, as the old man conjured a cushy armchair and sat down to his immediate right. It was time for the investiture of the Black estate.

Chapter Eleven: Lordship and Vassalage – Summer's End

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Once seated comfortably, Harry took a moment to survey the gathered beneficiaries. As expected, Narcissa and Draco were both in attendance. With a hint of amusement, Harry imagined that the incompetent Lord Malfoy was fully expecting to be invested with the Black title as well. The Slytherin seemed to feel Harry's glance, as he looked up and stared indignantly at the person that Draco felt was occupying his rightful place at the head of the table. Harry realized then that Draco didn't recognize him, as his long hair covered his scar, and most of his features had changed considerably since the last time the two had spoken. He briefly explored the idea of flashing his scar, but reconsidered, knowing that the shock would be so much sweeter if he just waited for the goblins to announce him as the new Lord Black.

Deciding that Draco wasn't worthy of any further consideration, Harry continued to look about the room. He recognized a few faces, those of a handful of Slytherin girls from his year at Hogwarts, as well as a single Ravenclaw. Pansy Parkinson was the only one Harry knew by

name, though he had never spoken with the simpering pug beyond petty exchanges of insults. There were three others, scattered about the room in various places with their parents, all much more attractive than Pansy. Harry briefly thought he saw Lupin sitting relatively isolated from the rest of the room, but didn't get a very good look, as the goblins in charge of the will reading chose that moment to enter the room.

"Greeting, ladies and gentlemen. You are all gathered here today to witness the investiture of the heir to the title of Lord Black, as well as to hear the reading of the last will and testament of the previous lord, Sirius Orion Black, who has recently departed from this world."

At this point, various members of the gathering began to speak in low voices, some fixing looks of mourning onto their faces. Harry felt a nearly unstoppable urge to charge up his chaotic energy and blast the lot of them into oblivion in his godfather's stead, but somehow managed to remain calm and seated. The goblins seemed to be of similar minds, judging by the increasingly disdainful expressions on their faces. Harry took a brief glance over at the old man, noticing that he looked decidedly less than pleased as well. The lead goblin cleared his throat rudely, bringing an end to the widespread flow of crocodile tears.

"Very well, without any further delay, let us commence with the proceedings."

One of the goblins opened a sealed document and handed a piece of parchment to the lead goblin, which spoke in a dignified tone.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, being of sound mind and body, do hereby declare this my last will and testament. I direct that my godson, Harry James Potter, be the executor of my estate and ask that he work in cooperation with Gringotts Wizard Bank in order to carry out the various provisions of this will. I have also prepared a personal statement, to be opened and read by Harry following the reading of this will..."

Harry filed that thought away, wanting to know whatever message Sirius had felt the need to convey from beyond the grave.

“...And now, on to business. First, I bequeath the title of Lord Black, and all of the social and political obligations thereof, to the only young man that I feel is capable of wielding them in a manner consistent with my personal wishes. That young man is my Harry James Potter, my godson. If the goblins would please now present him with the legacy ring, which I know to be held in trust by the bank...”

Harry allowed a slightly victorious smirk to cross his face at the shocked and outraged expressions of the pureblooded contingent of the Black family. Disowned though he had been by his mother, obviously none of them had expected Sirius to flagrantly defy all proper convention and snub the family by investing the lordship into an outsider. Draco particularly looked mortified, and glared straight at where Harry was sitting, realization finally dawning in his pale aristocratic features. With a nonchalant flip of his hair, Harry exposed his infamous scar and stared right back at Draco. Presently, the lead goblin reached Harry's position, holding the ring on a small cushion. Just as Harry was about to take the ring and place it on his finger, Draco jumped from his seat, flushed with jealous rage.

“I contest! Potter's mother was a filthy mudblood, and he doesn't have a drop of Black blood in his entire miserable body! I demand that the lordship be invested into a proper scion of the noble house of Black!”

Harry just looked back at Draco from his seat, not even deeming him worthy of rising to his feet to address. He gave Khariana's head a quick stroke as he replied.

“And I suppose you refer to yourself, Malfoy? Yes, your family's quite proper and noble, what with your father now shitting in a little hole in Azkaban. Tell me, how is Lucius doing, anyway? Has he managed to land himself a boyfriend yet? As dandy as he is, I'm sure he shouldn't have much difficulty...”

The snide insults towards his father managed to enrage Draco even further, as his face reached a shade of purple that even Vernon Dursley would have been pressed to match. Harry simply looked on with amusement as Draco fumbled for his wand, finally drawing it

from his robes with excessive vigor, causing him to stumble backward an inch or so. His technique was an absolute disgrace. Harry could have easily risen to his feet and gotten into position, drawn his wand and fired off at least two or three curses in the time that it took Draco just to reach for his. His first encounter with an auror would be his last. Really, Harry was now looking for a valid excuse to curse the little suckling out of his boots, and allowed him to make his move. Draco's face contorted into a visage of absolute hatred as he shrieked...

"CRUCIO!"

Harry could have burst out laughing on the spot, having baited Malfoy into using an Unforgivable right in front of Albus Dumbledore. Speaking of whom, no sooner had the burst of crimson light erupted from Draco's wand, the old man leapt to his feet and drew his wand with a nearly unbelievable fluidity considering his age and blasted the Cruciatus Curse into a wall with an unspoken spell. His eyes devoid of twinkle, pure fury etched onto his ancient face, Dumbledore spoke with a commanding voice as Draco paled, realizing too late the mistake he had just made. Whatever wizards within the room might have been willing to assist Draco in defending his father's honor shrunk back into their seats at the Headmaster's expression.

"Very unwise of you, Mister Malfoy, to attempt to..."

Harry had no desire to allow Dumbledore to finish his reprimand, his mind set on immediate reprisal. He drew his masterpiece wand with a nearly undetectable speed, and with a tight sweeping arc, Harry blasted Malfoy clear across the room, flesh exploding from the right half of his face. No incantation was needed. Draco's helpless form tore across the long table, leaving a trail of blood in its wake, and finally colliding with the sitting Pansy Parkinson, sending both tumbling to the floor in a tangled heap. Harry's two guardians made to continue the assault and maul the offending pureblood, but the young dakaathi hybrid stopped them with a mental command. Harry could feel Dumbledore's reproofing gaze upon his back, but didn't acknowledge it.

Presently, Draco's polished ash wand rolled over to within arm's reach of Harry, having been expelled from the former's hand as

Harry's curse made contact. Draco himself started to regain his bearings and scrambled back to his feet, only to be set upon and physically restrained by a quartet of security goblins. Harry shook his head with sneering amusement at his unworthy rival as he took the ring from the pillow. The Black legacy ring was ornately crafted of obsidian, and bore a small inscription on the inside that Harry didn't much care to read. He slipped the ring onto his left pinkie, indicating a lesser position of priority than Khariana's ring. With a small aural flash as black as midnight, the ring bonded itself to Harry's magic. He had officially taken his place as Lord Black.

Some of the gathering looked at Harry with a grudging respect at seeing that the ring had recognized him as being of adequate purity of blood to carry the lordship of the Black line. He met the eyes of the three nameless Slytherin girls from earlier, and was a bit surprised to notice that they smiled back at him. The security goblins hauled Draco up before Harry.

"Lord Evans, what would you have us do with this one? This is a Black family function, and so, as the invested lord of the family, the matter lies within your jurisdiction."

Glaring disdainfully at Malfoy, Harry reached over and grabbed the gray-eyed boy's wand. He leveled the wooden object right before Draco's eyes and snapped it with a single motion, casually throwing the pieces over his shoulder. Harry turned to the goblins.

"Remove this inbred ferret from my presence and escort him from the premises. Now, head goblin, if you would please continue with the reading. I'm sure all of us have better things to do than sit here all day."

"Of course..."

As requested, the head goblin began to read the individual provisions of the will. The bloodied Draco Malfoy was dragged wordlessly from the room, glaring at Harry with an expression of revulsion that only Severus Snape could match.

“...And now that the matter of the lordship is decided, let's get down to the provisions...”

All conversation within the room halted.

“...First, to my best friend, and the last of the Marauders, Remus Lupin, I leave a sum of one hundred thousand gold galleons, as well as a request. Take care of my godson, Moony. Support him in any way you can, and see to it that he is never left wanting for guidance and affection. Knowing my rash nature as I do, I'm quite sure that I didn't survive to see the final downfall of Voldemort. Make sure that Harry does, I beg of you. Oh, and if you get the chance, give Wormtail a good kick in the jewels for me whenever you get your hands on him. I'm counting on you, old friend...”

Harry heard a choked sob from a far corner of the room, and turned to see Remus Lupin sitting there, just as he had thought. Surprisingly, most of the unsavory characters in the room didn't say a word, and those who would have were sufficiently cowed by Harry's earlier display with Malfoy that they held their tongues.

“...Second, to my favorite cousin, Andromeda, and her family, I leave a sum of one hundred and fifty thousand gold galleons. Andy, I just want you to know that I've always respected you for standing up to the family and following your heart. Your husband is a good man, and you've raised a fine daughter. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. Nymphadora, sorry about the name, but let me say this to you: you're a great auror, but don't throw yourself completely into this war. Fall in love, get married, and enjoy life while it lasts. It could end at any moment, as I'm sure you can tell by looking at the circumstances of my own demise, whatever they may be. Oh, and I want you to have that umbrella stand from the house. You know the one...”

Harry saw a woman halfway down the table roll her eyes. He judged that it was probably Tonks, who could take any human form she chose.

“...And that brings me to the light of my life, my beloved godson. Harry, to you I leave the remainder of my estate. The remainder of my gold, all of the Black family artifacts, and legal ownership of all

properties owned by the family, including a certain place in particular. Let the group continue to use it, or kick them out on their asses. Whatever you want. Just, and Merlin, please listen to me, don't throw your life away for something stupid. I know how you are, and I admire you for it, but you mean the world and then some to all of us. You know what you have to do. Do it, and survive. Go out, see the world, find yourself a good woman, do all the things that I could never do. I know you'll miss me, and your mom and dad as well, but don't be in a rush to pay us a visit. We'll all be expecting plenty of good stories from you when your day finally does come. I have so much more to say, but some things are only for your eyes and thoughts. Don't forget to ask the goblins for my personal letter..."

"...Now, I know that my esteemed family is gathered here today, and I have a few things to say to the lot of you. First, for the many among you that choose to support Voldemort, I leave not a single bloody red knut. I do, however, leave to each of you a guaranteed ticket to Azkaban Prison, to be redeemed the day that my godson kicks the everloving shit out of your pretended lord. It's coming sooner than you think, so get your affairs in order. I also leave to each of you my undying contempt, and the promise of a good ass whipping the very day I meet you in the great beyond..."

Many outraged grumbles and curses greeted this last statement, and the vast majority of the gathered stood and left. Good riddance, Harry thought, proud of his godfather for taking one last swipe at these decadent vultures. Looking around, he noticed that a few families remained, including those of all three of the pretty Slytherin girls, all of whom smirked slightly at those departing. Narcissa Malfoy was also still sitting, but with a rather displeased expression. With the thinning crowd, Harry finally managed to get a good look at Remus, who smiled sadly at him.

"...And, finally, to those few among you that remain neutral, I have a final request. Please, don't cower in fear of the looming darkness, and don't throw your lot in with Voldemort. Go to my godson, and to those with whom he fights, and ask for protection. They will see to your safety. Avarice and corruption blind too many among the pureblooded community. I ask you to be the guiding light for those that can still see. For the young ones among you, still at Hogwarts, try

to get to know Harry. Give him a chance to show you what a wonderful person he is. Okay, Pronglet, I'm through embarrassing you now. All of you, and Harry, this includes you as well, don't let house prejudices hold you back. In the end, we're all in this together..."

It was almost as if Sirius knew that his death was looming, Harry thought. How else would he have known that his death would occur before Harry's graduation? Perhaps Trelawney had divined that he would live a long, productive life, effectively dooming him. Harry glanced over to Dumbledore, and saw him looking pensive. The old man did send Harry a twinkling smile upon noticing him. Turning about, Harry noticed several people approaching, though Narcissa reached his position first.

"Is there something I help you with, Mrs. Malfoy?"

"That won't be necessary, Lord Black. I only wished to apologize for my son's wholly inappropriate behavior, and to beseech you not to pursue any legal charges against him. As you surely well know, his attempted use of the Cruciatus Curse upon you could potentially land him in Azkaban for several years. Besides, I can guarantee you that the sheer humiliation of having his father insulted and wand snapped right before most of his extended family is punishment enough. Foolish though he may be, he is still my only son. I beg your mercy."

"Your request is granted, Mrs. Malfoy. Remonstrate with your son, and tell him to choose his battles more wisely from now on. I will not show him reprieve a second time."

Narcissa nodded her thanks and left with whatever dignity she could muster. Harry almost felt sorry for the proud woman, knowing that it must have been a great loss of face for her to have to publicly plead for mercy, especially before a sixteen year old boy. He could see the anger boiling just below the surface of her exquisite features, both towards Draco for his sheer stupidity, and towards Harry for rather needlessly humiliating him. He simply resolved to make it up to her the next time they met for conversation and sex. Behind where Narcissa had been standing were the three girls that he had been

watching for the better part of the proceedings. The middle one, an extremely well endowed brunette, stepped forward.

“Hi, I don’t think we’ve spoken before, but the three of us just wanted to tell you how impressed we are with the way you handled Malfoy. We’ve been waiting to see somebody finally put that useless brat in his place for five years now. We’re really sorry about your godfather, also. By the way, I’m Blaise, and my two friends are Daphne and Tracey. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The three girls’ full names came back to Harry upon hearing their firsts. Blaise Zabini had slightly exotic Mediterranean features and pretty green eyes that nearly matched Harry’s, flowing brown hair and a pair of perky, bouncing breasts that seemed to make up about half of her body mass. She spoke with the slightest hint of an Italian accent. Harry glanced over to either side of the voluptuous Slytherin at her two friends. Daphne Greengrass was quite tall, though a bit shorter than Hitomi, with piercing crystal blue eyes and a mane of strawberry blonde hair. Her legs looked as if the Gods themselves had sculpted them. Tracey Davis was a bit of a mixture of her friends. She had short, dark auburn hair, and an overall very nicely developed body, though lacking either of the extremes of the other two girls. By the lustful looks on all three girls’ faces, Harry’s dakaathi charm had taken full effect. Harry smiled slightly and took Blaise’s proffered hand gently.

“The pleasure is certainly mine, ladies, though I daresay that our friend Malfoy hasn’t learned a thing at all. Idiots like him never do. It’s rather sad, really.”

A trio of nearly identical smirks crossed their faces, as Tracey spoke up.

“Well, it’s not as if he’s worth discussing regardless. He and that fat bitch Parkinson deserve each other. Anyway, the three of us were thinking about heading over to the Leaky Cauldron for an early lunch. Perhaps you’d care to join us, Harry?”

Harry easily picked up the slight innuendo in the girl’s tone, realizing that they had every intention of getting a room at the Leaky Cauldron

and taking him upstairs for the remainder of the afternoon. Naturally, he also had every intention of going with them, but a gnarled hand on his shoulder rather annoyingly reminded him that it wasn't an option. The slight frown that formed on his face was purely genuine.

"Sorry, I wish I could, but I'm a bit indisposed. Perhaps some other time?"

They nodded cheerfully, as Blaise and Daphne directed slight glares at the old man. Being Slytherins, the three girls were no doubt aware of Dumbledore's meddling ways. It was probably a frequent topic of discussion in their common room. That thought sparked something in Harry's mind, and he quickly decided that he would go out of his way to befriend the sexy purebloods. Daphne replied for them.

"We understand. Maybe we can pay you a visit on the train, then?"

"That'd be great. I'll see you three in September."

"Bye, Harry."

With that, the three turned to leave, a rather irritated Harry in their wake. Blaise quickly turned back.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Happy birthday, Harry."

"Thanks."

Harry felt slightly better after that, though still annoyed with missing the opportunity for an afternoon orgy with no less than three beautiful girls. Still, he had business to attend to. Harry turned back to the head goblin.

"So, do you have that letter that Sirius made reference to in the will?"

"We do, and it's being brought down presently, along with your father's legacy ring. We would like to take the opportunity to invest you as the head of the Potter line this morning. This should have been done years ago, but certain elements barred the way."

Harry could easily tell that the goblin was referring to Dumbledore, but let the comment slide. The old man couldn't push him around any longer, and dwelling too much on the past clouded one's vision of the future. Soon enough, a goblin arrived carrying the aforementioned items. There was no special pomp or regalia to Harry's investiture as Lord Potter. He quickly fit the ring, a simple golden band encrusted with a large ruby carved into the shape of a soaring eagle, onto his right ring finger, the parallel position to Khariana's ring. The ruby glowed slightly and bonded to his magic. The result was Harry becoming the invested lord of three ancient lines. That matter attended to, Harry opened his godfather's letter and read.

Hey there, Pronglet.

If you're reading this, then I've more than likely done something rash and stupid and gotten myself killed. First, I want you to know that I love you. Harry, you truly were the son that I was never able to have, and I cherished every last second I was able to spend with you. I hope that I lived long enough to see Voldemort dead and gone, and you out of Hogwarts and happily married to your own special young lady, whoever she may be. Alas, I'm pretty sure that I didn't make it that far. I'm no diviner or any such rubbish, but I know myself well enough to know that I'll come running any time you're in hot water, and will eventually be forced to pay the price for it. Oh well, them's the breaks, as the muggles say.

I write this letter in order to give you a warning, Harry. Distance yourself from Dumbledore, and prepare yourself for the destiny that we both know is yours. If Albus hasn't told you, there was a Prophecy made before your birth, one that concerns both you and Voldemort. I don't remember all the words, never had much of a mind for details. Heh, that was always Moony's specialty. Still, the gist of the Prophecy is pretty simple. At the end of all of this mess, it's going to come down to a final duel between you and Voldemort, and only one of you is going to walk away. Now, I know in my heart that you're going to be the one to win, Harry. But if that's going to happen, you need to train. Don't be afraid to go into the less than accepted realms of magic if you must. If your intent is true and pure, then you will not falter. But know this. Dumbledore will never willingly allow you to do what you have to do. He thinks that you'll just come through on some miracle in the end. I'm not willing to risk that, and neither should you be. That's

why I've left you all of my estate. Blackmail the old man with your ownership of Grimmauld Place, or just run away for awhile. You'll figure out the way, pup. I believe in you.

Now, I have one more piece of advice. Even if the entire world seems to be against you, you can trust Remus. I love the man like my own brother, and he cares about you just as much as I did, and I daresay as much as James and Lily did as well. No matter what happens, he'll always be there for you, if only you'll allow him. I wouldn't have asked him to look out for you if I didn't think so.

There are so many other things that I want to tell you, but I'm afraid that a simple letter would not suffice. I can only hope that I lived long enough to say some of it in person. I can tell you that I'd like to punch Albus's lights out for sticking you with those rotten muggles for all those years. I'll leave you with this message: I'm proud of you, pup, and so are your parents. Live a long and full life. Enjoy yourself like I was never allowed to. Change the world like I know you can. Don't be in any rush to come visit me in the afterlife. After all, what's a half a century or so when we've got the rest of eternity to explore the great beyond? It'll be just me and you, and James and Lily, and Remus when he passes on. It'll be a great adventure, but you'd damn better spend a good long lifetime gathering tales to tell us around the campfire first. See ya around, kiddo.

All my love,

Sirius "Padfoot" Black

Harry, in his mind, really wanted to cry his last tears for Sirius right then, but they just wouldn't come. All he could do was stare sadly at the letter. He felt himself being pulled into a hug, and glanced over to see the golden eyes of Remus Lupin looking into his forest green orbs. Harry returned the hug.

"Hey there, Moony. Had a good summer so far?"

Remus smiled sadly, tears still in his eyes.

"I've had better, cub. You look different. Merlin, I've been beyond worried sick about you. Where did you disappear to?"

"That's a story better told elsewhere. Can you make it back to Headquarters for my birthday tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. That reminds me, I've got some shopping to do. I'll see you tonight, Harry. Have a pleasant day, Albus."

With that, Lupin took his leave. Harry wished he'd have stayed longer, but knew from what Hermione had told him earlier that the old werewolf needed to be alone with his sorrow for awhile. Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"Are you ready to leave, sir? I need to get away from all this for now, if you don't mind."

The old wizard nodded.

"Of course, Harry. But first, I must express my displeasure with your treatment of young Mister Malfoy. Naturally, I do not at all condone his attempt to cast an Unforgivable Curse upon you, but you brought about the situation by taunting the boy about his father's imprisonment. Further, snapping his wand was perhaps the direst insult you could ever think to hurl at a wizard of his breeding. Honestly, Harry, the way that you have treated him this morning is remarkably similar to the manner in which Professor Snape has long treated you. As I did not entirely blame you for assaulting Severus in the alley last week, I do not entirely blame young Draco for lashing out at you today."

Harry only shook his head. Surely the old man could not be serious.

"My father was a good man. Lucius Malfoy is a pile of worm-ridden dung. I have no pity either for him or for his worthless excuse for a son. Both have suffered infinitely less than they deserve. The only reason I spared Draco from Azkaban today is because I know he'll do more damage to Voldemort's cause by being here on the outside and screwing things up than he would being out of action in prison. And, quite honestly, the little ferret isn't worth any further discussion. Now,

can we please meet Hermione and the Weasleys for lunch, Professor? I'm famished."

"Very well, Harry. Lead the way."

Harry left, again keeping his pace leisurely in order to allow the Headmaster to keep up, only slightly noticing the distinct frown on the old man's face as they made the walk to the Leaky Cauldron, the two tigers trotting alongside Harry.

The rest of the afternoon in Diagon Alley progressed without any particular incident. Ron had nearly choked laughing when Harry relayed the story of his encounter with Malfoy at the will reading. Ginny was likewise pleased, and even Mrs. Weasley had smirked vindictively at the plight of Lucius's son. Harry picked up his order at Madame Malkin's, observing that one of his basilisk hide battle robes had been made noticeably larger than the other. The proprietor indicated that this was to allow room for growth, but Harry believed that the store had just wanted to use up the last of the material in order to bill him for the entire stock. Still, the larger robe was a great fit for Ron, and Harry allowed his friend to borrow it for the time being. Ron was pleased, both at the garment itself and at being spared the embarrassment of being outright given such an expensive gift. Harry switched his dress robe for a nearly identical one made of the acromantula silk. The material was comfortable beyond belief, and so light that Harry nearly felt naked walking around.

Aside from that, they only needed to pick up textbooks and head over to an apothecary for Potions ingredients for Hermione and Ginny. Harry looked around for a volume on old pureblooded wizarding laws in the bookstore, but didn't find one that suited his needs. In the young dakaathi hybrid's eyes, Albus Dumbledore seemed almost comically amused at spending his day engaged in such a mundane pursuit as a simple shopping trip. Harry had mentioned wanting to pay a visit to the twins' shop, but Ron told him that they were having endless difficulty in getting a business license due to their failure to graduate from school. Needless to say, they were rather unhappy with the Ministry of Magic, and were even considering returning to Hogwarts in order to retake their final year. Dumbledore had immediately granted the pair permission, in the event that they decided to return.

That evening found roughly the entire Order of the Phoenix gathered in the large dining hall of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Noticeably absent was Severus Snape, who would sooner be boiled alive than partake of Harry's birthday party. Mrs. Weasley had outdone herself, spending the entire afternoon in the kitchen and cooking up a meal to feed the huge gathering and the largest birthday cake Harry had ever seen. Ginny had volunteered to help, and even Hermione had managed to detach herself from her books long enough to lend a hand. Still, the most valuable assistant was Dobby. The little house elf had virtually pleaded with Dumbledore to be allowed to help prepare Harry's birthday. The culinary crew had been forced to chase Ron out of the kitchen on at least a dozen occasions, the terminally hungry redhead always looking to sneak a bite.

The meal progressed noisily. Harry had spoken to the twins for long enough to get their confirmation that they would indeed grace the hallowed halls of Hogwarts Castle with their unique presence for a bonus year. After a horrendously out of sync rendition of "Happy Birthday", the time had come for Harry to blow out the candles. He did so, wishing for the quick and complete destruction of his enemies, and a long and prosperous reign as ruler of wizarding Britain. And then, presents. The house had been deluged for much of the day with owls bearing birthday cards and gifts for the icon of the wizarding world. And so, Harry unwrapped.

From Bill, he had received an excellent book on old pureblooded wizarding laws. Apparently, the redhead had bought out the only decent tome from Flourish and Blotts a week earlier, explaining why Harry couldn't find one. Fleur had gotten him a small book written exclusively for veela on suppressing their latent aura of charm, though Harry was rather enjoying the effects of his dakaathi variant thus far. Still, the ability could prove useful, and he decided to read through it at some point.

The twins had, of course, supplied him with a plethora of their joke shop merchandise. Molly was less than pleased, but kept it to herself.

Hermione had bought him a large book of auror spells while in the bookstore, while Harry had been engaged elsewhere. He vaguely

remembered wanting to pick up such a text himself, and was grateful to get it. He wasn't sure, though, if the gift was meant as a subtle statement of Hermione's opinion regarding him tossing dark curses about. It was just the sort of thing that she would do.

Ron and Ginny had both chipped in to buy him a new set of Quidditch robes and guards. Harry had absentmindedly resolved to play again this coming term, knowing without needing to be told that his ban had been lifted the moment Umbridge had been run out of Hogwarts. He could honestly think of better things to do with his time, but it was just something that was expected of him, and would thus assist ever so slightly in averting any suspicion of him.

And then, there were the packages that had come via owl post.

The first bore a flowery script that Harry knew to belong to a girl. Opening it, Harry saw with a degree of satisfaction that it was from Cho. The accompanying letter said little, aside from the usual birthday tidings. The present itself, however, was considerably more than expected. It was an ornate necklace, a solid gold chain with a slightly clipped Golden Snitch attached. The little bugger was inlaid with several sparkling emeralds, the exact same forest shade as Harry's eyes. Its tiny wings fluttered about helplessly, unable to lift its body weight. The necklace was obviously a very expensive piece of work, and had probably been paid for by Cho's father, though the Ravenclaw Seeker had certainly had the majority input in its selection. As he hoisted the gorgeous chain around his neck, Harry hoped that this wasn't some first pitch by the girl's parents to barter her hand in marriage to him. Cho was too precious to be bought and sold like some commodity, though Harry wondered for a moment where exactly the thought had come from. This time, he did notice the sunstone's glow in his masterpiece wand. Yet another mystery for him to stew over...

A second parcel, this one of completely unknown origin, heralded three packages. The first was a bottle of liquid charmed to never run out. The smell of the contents was vaguely familiar, though the second gift gave him the answer. It was a kodachi, a short katana designed primarily for defensive combat. The extremely sharp blade was a sparkling forest green, a color that was quickly becoming a

theme for Harry. The package had rather obviously come from Hitomi and Kenzo, wherever they were by then, and the liquid in the bottle was the medicated water from their village. Both gifts would prove very useful. The third present contained scribbled instructions that it was not to be opened until Harry was alone.

Another parcel contained similar instructions, though its message was written right on the mailing address.

Finally, the party ended, and Harry went upstairs for the night. Ron had gone straight to bed, and Hermione and Ginny remained downstairs engaged in conversation with some of the guests. Convinced that he wasn't going to be intruded upon, Harry decided to open those last two birthday packages. He started with the unknown parcel, wanting to open Hitomi's last. After gently tearing open the wrapping, Harry received a minor sensory overload as three pairs of silk knickers cascaded gently into his hands, all of them still rather moist with arousal. His nose was assaulted by three distinct flavors of feminine honey. Harry had a good idea where this unique present had come from, and the short accompanying note confirmed it.

Hey there, Harry

We were originally going to send a picture, but decided that we wanted to see your initial reaction with our own eyes. So, we just sent these instead. Try and see if you can guess which one belongs to each of us! Make sure you get a good night's rest and eat a hearty breakfast before the start of term. We can guarantee that you'll need the energy! See you on the train!

Hugs and kisses,

Blaise, Daphne and Tracey

And here Harry had thought that Slytherins were supposed to be subtle. Well, at least he was now completely certain that the three girls were interested. He placed the provocative undergarments in a drawer, so that nobody would be likely to find them, and opened up the parcel from Hitomi. He was expecting something similar, knowing the mercurial kunoichi's sense of humor as he did. Unwrapping the gift, he found no underwear, but instead a large nude photograph that

depicted her draped casually across the futon in Kenzo's guest bedroom. It was the very same bed on which the two had passed many an evening exploring one another, and on which Harry had lost his virginity barely a week ago. The animated picture showed the beautiful Japanese woman sensually touching herself and working her lithe body into an orgasm. Harry very nearly had one himself just from watching.

After watching the scene a second time, Harry turned the photograph over, to see a message written in scribbled English. Hitomi couldn't write the language particularly well, though she spoke it quite fluently. He guessed that she was just too used to writing in Japanese. Harry read the short message, pleased to hear from his first serious partner. It was full of misspelled words, but Harry was able to make out what she was trying to write.

A very happy birthday to you, my sexy young student.

I hope this package finds you well, and that you haven't forgotten about me so soon. I certainly haven't forgotten about you, and I haven't had a decent night's sleep since your departure from the village. Seriously, everything would have been so much easier if you had just stayed here with me and forgotten about all that crap in the outside world. I'm being totally honest when I say that you haven't left my thoughts for more than a few seconds at a time. Okay, I'm sorry about the attitude. You know, I'm usually not the wistful or possessive type, but it's just that you're so different from anybody I've ever known before. When you came to us, I almost immediately felt like you belonged with us, and that you'd be with us forever. And then, I felt that attraction, something that I've never really felt for any other man before. Your leaving was like a distant nightmare, something that I knew was coming but never wanted to acknowledge. It came far too soon. Wow, I'm really pouring my heart out here. I usually try to keep my feelings bottled up, but I hope you won't mind me indulging myself just this once.

I want to be with you, Harry. If only I knew where you were staying, I would come and find you right now. Since you left, I've been sleeping in the guest bedroom, on our futon. It's the place where I can be the closest to you. I can still sense your aura in the room, and feel your essence on the bed. I wasn't joking when I told you that I was going

to sneak into Hogwarts and visit you. I fully intend to pop in through your dormitory window one night. Until then, Harry. We'll finally be leaving the village tomorrow. I have to say it's going to be painful leaving this place behind. It's the only home I've ever known. But maybe, when this is all over...well, that's something I really should say in person. Take care, Harry.

Love always,

Hitomi

Harry honestly wasn't sure what to think of her letter. They had shared something special that last night in the village, and he was certainly fond of Hitomi on a level that he could not identify with many others in this world, but he still wasn't positive about anything. And now she was more or less implying that she had fallen in love with him. She hadn't put it in those words, but Harry wasn't stupid. Only, he really didn't know how to deal with something like this. The idea didn't bother him at all, but it did complicate matters somewhat. It was something that he would eventually have to deal with, but he would be able to think about the issue for the remainder of summer, at least. He would hopefully be able to answer her appropriately the next time their paths crossed. As he rolled the matter around inside his mind, Harry vaguely noticed the moonstone shards in his wand's discharge stone bathing the darkened bedroom with a radiant silver glow.

Harry just held onto the photograph as he fell asleep. For the first time since that night in village, Voldemort chose to send him a dream vision. Again, the scene before him was extremely hazy. Harry could just barely discern figures moving about. The tall figure leading the whole spectacle was obviously Voldemort himself, though Harry couldn't discern any of his serpentine features. Nearly transparent Death Eaters roamed about blasting running figures with green jets of light. A small ring of them was torturing a particularly corpulent person, while others were setting fire to a large building in the background. Just as had occurred in both other Voldemort visions so far that summer, the first at Privet Drive and the second in the village, the scene continued to phase out and soon aborted. There was no pain in his scar.

The force wasn't even sufficient to awaken Harry this time, and his dreams shifted to a much more pleasant scene, one of himself in a luxurious bedroom. A nude Hitomi fed him raspberries from a large bowl as he lay back using Blaise Zabini's massive bouncing chest as a pillow. Cho rode him frantically, the exotic Chinese girl uttering sweet little moans as he buried himself to the hilt inside her and caressed her soft skin with his hands. Daphne and Tracey both watched on, wrapping themselves in his forest green wings. Across the room, a naked Narcissa Malfoy painfully wrenched her son by his slicked platinum hair, forcing him to watch Harry's pleasure and ridiculing him in a soft cooing voice for being every bit as useless and weak as his father, telling Draco how he would never be even a fraction as good as Harry. Back in the waking world, the sleeping Harry smirked broadly on his bed.

Harry woke late the next morning, the vision of that erotic dream etched into his mind. There was no way that all of the involved women would ever agree to such a scene, but it was nice to think about regardless. Dressing himself in a red and black yukata and experimentally girding his brand new kodachi onto the waistband, Harry sauntered down the stairs with his two pets and looked around for any signs of activity. He found a large gathering of Order members, including their incompetent leader, assembled in the sitting room. Molly Weasley looked positively distraught about something. Naturally, Harry decided to investigate.

"What's all the commotion about? Did something happen?"

Upon taking notice of his presence, Molly swept Harry up in a protective hug.

"Oh Harry, I'm so sorry! There was nothing we could do!"

Harry arched an eyebrow.

"Well, you're forgiven, I guess. What's going on here?"

Harry received no answer, other than Dumbledore beckoning him over to have a seat on a sofa. The old man tried to look him in the eyes, but Harry diverted his gaze ever so slightly. Sighing, Dumbledore took a seat in a leather armchair across from Harry.

“Harry, did you have a vision last night?”

Thinking about it, Harry did vaguely recall a visit from old snakeface, but couldn't dredge up any details about it, aside from a building being set ablaze.

“Yeah, but I can't remember any details.”

Dumbledore nodded.

“It seems, Harry, that Lord Voldemort finally decided to break his silence last night. There was a major attack, in Surrey.”

Realization flashed through Harry's eyes.

“Was it Privet Drive, sir?”

“No, your relatives' home is still protected through your mother's sacrifice, at least for the time being. However, the Death Eaters assaulted a popular muggle nightclub in the relative vicinity. Voldemort himself was in command. At the time, your cousin, Dudley, was attending a party with a group of his friends.”

The old man hardly needed to complete the story, though Harry asked anyway.

“He's dead, then?”

“Yes, Harry, Dudley Dursley was tortured and killed by Death Eaters in front of Jameson's Nightclub, along with his friends and forty-eight other muggles. His body was burnt and impaled onto a wall of the destroyed building, along with a birthday message directed to you from Voldemort, written in the boy's own blood.”

To be perfectly honest, Harry couldn't have cared less about the fate of Vernon's pig of a son. The great turd had made his life a living Hell for that long decade before Hogwarts. A violent death at the hands of the very sort of people he had so often ignorantly belittled was rather fitting, actually. Still, Harry supposed that he should at least make a

show of being upset about the situation. He slowly fixed a hurt expression onto his face.

“Have Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia been informed?”

“They have, and needless to say, your aunt and uncle hold you fully responsible for what happened, despite the fact that you were nowhere near Little Whinging when the attack took place. Naturally, you will no longer be welcome in their home. I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry wasn’t sorry at all, but nodded in acceptance of the old man’s apology. He ate his breakfast without a word and went back upstairs, looking for something to occupy his time.

The last month of summer recess passed quickly enough. Harry continued training with his newfound skills, particularly focusing on learning to more easily harness his chaotic energy. He had some success, though he couldn’t exactly hurl it about to see if his endurance with it had increased. He also attempted to channel it into his kodachi. That experiment was also a success, as the blade glowed with a translucent black aura identical to the energy that he was able to gather within his hand. As Harry toyed about with chaotic energy, he could feel an increased awareness of Zharrghast’s dormant presence within his body. Still, the fallen god had remained completely silent ever since Harry’s departure from the village.

Harry also continued to read, particularly from the books that he had been given for his birthday. The auror curses might prove useful, though Harry had no particular intention of using anything less than lethal force against Voldemort’s forces if there was any help for it. Even so, there would no doubt be situations where using Dark Arts would prove hazardous to his legal status. He also read through the book from Bill, learning several old and still applicable customs and statutes that could bail him out of a mess with any established authority. Fleur’s book was also interesting and helpful, and Harry learned to repress his dakaathi charm at will somewhat, though the method was far from perfect. After all, Harry was not a veela, and the mechanisms of the two different races were rather dissimilar.

He continued to observe Hermione as she worked with the book he had left out for her. She seemed to be absorbed in it for a long time,

and became increasingly frustrated. The Dark Arts, it appeared, was a branch of magic that the muggleborn witch simply had little aptitude for beyond the basics. She just didn't seem to have the mindset to hurt people, though she started to warm up more to Harry and the rest of her old friends over the course of the month. Hermione eventually returned the book and apologized to Harry for taking his things, and asked to borrow the book of auror curses instead. As far as Harry could tell, she was still more or less undecided on whom to trust, though he hadn't really made an overt move of any sort against the old man yet.

Harry frequently practiced with his kodachi as well, becoming increasingly skilled at drawing it quickly, and at slashing and parrying. He chose to practice with his left hand, as he would assuredly be holding his wand in his primary hand during an actual fight. He was by no means a swordsman, but he could fight relatively well with the weapon should the need arise. Still, he quickly decided that he would be sticking to his wand as his primary weapon of choice. Hitomi and Kenzo had chosen a good weapon for Harry, as his major uses for the blade were to parry oncoming attacks and to slice down any enemy that managed to get close enough to make using spells a risky move. Hopefully, he would learn to use it more effectively in his weapons training elective at school.

As for events outside Grimmauld Place, Harry received reports from Gringotts through Bill every ten days or so. They were nothing particularly special, only progress reports from various Shinn Kohaku locations. He hoped that most of his espionage fronts would be fully operational within a few weeks of returning to Hogwarts. He also got a letter from Ts'ao Chang saying that his armaments would be complete by the end of August, and that he would send them with Cho for him to collect aboard the train. Harry's number of personal followers stayed the same, though he intended to swell his ranks within Hogwarts. He just wasn't aware of anybody else among the Order that he felt confident enough in to approach. Tonks was a possibility, but she owed a lot of loyalty to the old man for protecting her mother from her vengeful relatives following her expulsion from the Black family. He trusted Sirius's word that he could depend on Remus, but the werewolf had been asked to go back on his mission for the Order after Harry's birthday.

Narcissa had eventually contacted him a few weeks after the will reading. Harry solicited assistance from Ron and Ginny, asking them to tell anybody looking for him while he was away that he was feeling under the weather. As expected, the woman wasn't particularly happy with him. From what she had rather imperiously told him, Voldemort had been most displeased with the result of Draco's encounter with Harry that morning at Gringotts, and had expressed it to him through an extended bout of Cruciatus. She had no reply to his retort that Draco's own stupidity had brought the situation about, except to say that most of the problem could have been averted had Harry controlled his urge to posture and humiliate Draco. Still, she forgave him quickly enough, desperate for sex as she was. The entire episode was forgotten the next morning. Narcissa had been able to tell him that the Dark Lord was focusing his current energies on fathering an heir, and that her sister had been chosen to bear the child. That was of little concern to Harry, but it presented a delicious opportunity to pay back Bellatrix for Sirius's death. In order to quell the last of her discontent, Harry laid her down a final time before departing, and acted in a generally affectionate manner for the duration of their liaison, pretended though it was.

The morning of the start of term was a cold and rainy one. Harry dressed in his white and forest green yukata, with straw sandals on his feet and both kodachi and masterpiece wand girded at the waist. His wings were folded against his body, his emerald snitch necklace shining in the florescent lights of King's Cross-Station. Grindelwald and Khariana flanked him on either side. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and the twins were all with him as well. And so, Harry walked through the barrier at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters one more time, not at all knowing that this day would turn out to be one of the more eventful of his young life.

(End Chapter Eleven)

Author's Note: Another chapter concluded. I like the way this one came out, even if I had to summarize a lot of stuff. But, seriously, I just wanted to get through summer break already. I tend to get annoyed when stories take like twenty five chapters before the term even starts, and I don't care to subject my readers to it. I hope

everybody enjoyed the will reading, and some of Harry's birthday presents. There'll be a lot of action in the next chapter. Some has been set up, and some will be completely spontaneous.

Again, a commentary on the subject of Hermione...I know a lot of people will think I'm flip-flopping with her, but I'm really not. Her messing in the Dark Arts was a bit of a phase, a reaction to nearly getting killed earlier, and she did pick up some stuff, but I never meant to turn her into a full-out dark witch. Like I stated in the chapter, I just don't see her having the disposition for it. That's not necessarily to say that she won't side with Harry in the coming conflict with Dumbledore.

Writing this chapter took quite a bit out of me, so I don't have much patience for writing a long author's note at the moment. Thanks for all the reviews, and let me know what you all thought about the reading, and anything else in the chapter, and try to venture a guess as to some of what is going to happen in the next chapter.

The morning of the start of term was a cold and rainy one. Harry dressed in his white and forest green yukata, with straw sandals on his feet and both kodachi and masterpiece wand girded at the waist. His wings were folded against his body, his emerald snitch necklace shining in the florescent lights of King's Cross Station. Grindelwald and Khariana flanked him on either side. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and the twins were all with him as well. And so, Harry walked through the barrier at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters one more time, not at all knowing that this day would turn out to be one of the more eventful of his young life.

Chapter Twelve: Bloodlust – The Prince's First Battle

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

The platform was the same as Harry had always remembered it. Hogwarts students of various age rushed about, eager to board the Hogwarts Express and secure their compartments. Some were accompanied by parents, and cracks of apparition filled the air. Looking about, Harry spied a familiar head of long raven hair situated near the train's entrance. Cho was looking about in the opposite direction at the moment, but appeared to be alone and keeping an eye out for something. A large case that Harry assumed to contain his promised armaments sat on the pavement near her. Smiling to himself, he stealthily crept up directly behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, eliciting a sharp yelp of surprise from the pretty Ravenclaw. He slowly leaned down to her ear, rather enjoying the contact.

"Looking for somebody?"

Wide obsidian eyes turned about to look into Harry's forest green.

"Merlin, Harry. Just scare me to death, why don't you? I've got your order from my uncle."

"I noticed. Honestly, though, I'm more interested in you at the moment..."

With quick Seeker reflexes, Cho whirled about in Harry's loose embrace to face him, soft hands reaching up and resting on his toned shoulders. Her chin pressed lightly against his sternum. Harry glanced about and noticed a few boys, mostly Ravenclaws and Slytherins, sending jealous glares in his direction. He just sneered slightly and pulled her closer, rounded breasts pressing lightly against his upper ribcage. Honestly, Harry was a bit surprised that Cho was just letting him hold her like this. They had barely spoken at her family's complex, and the one date they had been on before had abruptly ended on much less than amicable terms. Then again, she had pecked him on the cheek as he was leaving her home. He decided to see how far he could go with her, at least verbally, though she spoke first.

"And just what about me are you interested in, Harry Potter? I can't help but notice that you're wearing my necklace. I'm glad you like it. Or are you just wearing it to appease me?"

"Yes, quite a beautiful piece of jewelry, nearly as much so as you. I really ought to thank you properly for such a thoughtful gift. How does tonight in the second floor broom closet sound?"

Casting his eyes directly downward, Harry could see her smiling up at him, though he quickly opted to enjoy the rather superb view down her robes instead. He was only offhandedly flirting with the girl, in an attempt to use his charm to repair some of the damage that the previous year had wrought between him and his first crush. Cho seemed to be up to the challenge, though his approach was working, if the glowing expression on her face was any indicator.

"Play your cards right, and I might just take you up on that. You know, Harry, you really have changed a lot this summer. I can remember when you couldn't even form a coherent sentence around me, much less flirt. I definitely prefer the new model."

Harry chuckled softly, drawing a small blush from Cho. He hugged her a bit tighter still, finally noticing the Head Girl's badge affixed to her robes as it pressed into him.

“Just had to remind me of all that, huh? So, you’re Head Girl? Congratulations, Cho.”

“Thank-you. Now I get to give you detention if you act like a prat to me.”

“Well, just as long as it’s at the Astronomy Tower and you promise to oversee it personally.”

Cho shook her head slightly, unconsciously rubbing against Harry’s chest like a purring cat. He snaked a hand through her long hair in response.

“Very smooth, Harry. I love the outfit, by the way. It looks good on you, though I’m positive the sword is against school rules. You might put somebody’s eye out. Well, if you do, just do me a favor and try and make sure it’s Malfoy. That little creep’s always leering at me. It makes me sick to my stomach. So, since when have you been into the Japanese look?”

“That’s...a bit of a story. Sit with me on the train? I know you have the Prefect’s meeting first...”

The slightly downcast look in Cho’s eyes told Harry that he wasn’t going to be enjoying the Chinese girl’s company on the train. He was at least pleased to note that she looked unhappy about it, though.

“I can’t, Harry. I have to stay up in the front compartment with the Head Boy until we reach Hogwarts, just in case something happens during the trip and the Prefects need to find us. Maybe we can meet up somewhere after the feast?”

Harry nodded.

“That’d be perfect. Room of Requirement at ten thirty work for you?”

“Sure, I’ll see you then. We’d better get aboard the train.”

Cho detached herself from Harry and headed into the train with her luggage, but not before leaning in on her tiptoes and softly brushing

her lips against his. Harry grabbed the armament case that she had left behind and made to follow, taking his trunk with his free hand. Glancing around the platform, he noticed that he and Cho had gathered a bit of an audience, as Michael Corner, Terry Boot, and Marietta Edgecombe were looking directly at him, along with a small gathering of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Marietta scowled at Harry and stomped aboard the train, muttering something about Cho setting herself up to get hurt again. He could still see the effects of Hermione's cursed parchment from the previous year tattooed onto the little sneak's forehead like the brand of a criminal. Terry rolled his eyes in Marietta's direction and followed, nodding at Harry with a friendly smile. Michael stared at Harry for a moment, before sending a smile of his own, along with a thumbs up. Apparently, Ginny's rumor that Michael and Cho were seeing one another had been exaggerated. The younger Ravenclaw walked up a bit closer to Harry, looked around quickly in both directions, and spoke in a whisper.

"Hey, good job there, mate. Figured you two'd be getting back together sooner or later. Seems you know how to deal with her a bit better now, too. So, tell me, is Ginny Weasley dating anybody?"

Harry rolled his eyes slightly. He and Cho weren't officially together again yet, or at least he told himself so. Of course, that situation was likely to change by the end of the night, but until then, he still felt completely free to have his fun. And he fully intended to, especially if the three Slytherin girls from the will reading made good on their promised visit during the trip. He really needed to get on the train, before the last of the empty compartments ran out, and made to dispense with Corner as quickly as possible.

"Sorry, Michael. She's been with Dean Thomas since before the end of last term."

Michael stamped his foot, but kept the smile on his face.

"Bugger. Well, you'll let me know if she becomes available again, right?"

"Sure thing, mate. See you around."

“Hey, one last thing...”

Harry sighed inwardly and turned around

“...Is DA on again this year? A whole bunch of my friends have been asking about it...”

Honestly, Harry hadn't thought much about continuing the DA. He really didn't want to, unless he could form a faction that was loyal only to him. And if that were the case, the material that he would be teaching would fall far outside of the standard school curriculum. He actually quite liked the idea of that. His own private crack unit of students trained in the Dark Arts and other pursuits by Harry himself. They would constitute his elite guard, his personal enforcers. He would just have to find a place to instruct them, a place where nobody could stumble upon them and go running to the old man. Remembering that Michael was waiting for an answer, Harry shrugged.

“Dunno, I guess it really depends on the quality of this year's DADA professor. I'll talk to Hermione and make a decision within the week. You'll be among the first to know.”

“Right, thanks. Later.”

Harry turned and boarded the Hogwarts Express without any further adieu. He surprisingly managed to find one of the more spacious compartments at the rear of the train completely unoccupied. The room had comfortable leather seating that completely spanned the far and side walls, along with a large wooden table in the center. Harry took a seat along the far wall of the room and reclined back facing the compartment door. Grindelwald and Khariana, who had stayed mostly out of sight outside on the platform, appeared in the room with a pair of soft, simultaneous cracks. Harry wasted no time in opening up the armament case in order to admire Ts'ao Chang's work.

He was not disappointed. The master blacksmith had lived up to his reputation and then some. The armament case contained, as ordered, a breastplate, a pair of gauntlets, and a pair of leg guards. Every piece was forged of arkanite and plated with intricately carved jade, and was light as a feather and virtually impenetrable by both

weapons and magic. The breastplate reached down to slightly below the waist, and also had a pair of flexible parts to cover the shoulders. The design on the front consisted primarily of a picture of a winged male holding a great sword aloft. This man had long hair, and was dressed in full armor and an overlaying open robe. He was equally terrible and entrancing to behold. At either side of the man stood two women, one significantly taller than the other, but both dressed in an identical Oriental fashion and radiating a nearly tangible sense of extreme beauty and sensuality. The central figure's wings were wrapped in a possessive gesture around them, one covering each. Overhead, a fierce blazing sun and a gentle crescent moon loomed beside one another in the sky, impossibly content to share the same space. The three figures occupied a raised dais, and countless figures of various races stood in full military array below. At their feet, both a great serpent and a proud phoenix lay slain, their blood pooling onto the dais and mixing, cascading like a waterfall down the stairs, to the edge of the crowd below. Harry couldn't help but feel a certain sense of fulfillment as he gazed upon the magnificent scene. Was this his destiny?

The gauntlets and leg guards were equally beautiful, reaching from his wrists and ankles up to his elbows and knees, respectively. All four pieces were carved remarkably similar to Harry's masterpiece wand, with large serpentine dragons coiling around the outsides, claws and wings extended majestically. Flawless form and unrivaled function. Such were the nature of Ts'ao Chang's masterpieces. Harry immediately resolved to send Cho's uncle an extremely satisfied letter as soon as possible. He fit the gauntlets and leg guards on, flexing his extremities slightly in order to help his body adapt to them, and propped the breastplate up on the table, studying its design for a while longer.

Harry remained more or less alone in his compartment for the early part of the trip. Ron and Hermione had dropped by for a moment, but quickly had to leave for the Prefect's meeting. Ginny had come in with them, and had stayed for a while after they left, but eventually went to go sit with her boyfriend. She had invited Harry along, but he hadn't been interested. Luna Lovegood had been named one of the Ravenclaw Prefects for her year, according to Ginny, and was likely tied up at the meeting. The twins were sitting with Katie Bell, catching

up and discussing the upcoming Quidditch season, and none of Harry's other friends would likely recognize him, even if they did happen to walk by his remote compartment. The students at the platform had been able to only after having heard his loudly whispered conversation with Cho, during which she had uttered his name several times. Harry found himself rather enjoying the quiet, of course meaning that it was due to abruptly end. His compartment door slammed open, signifying the arrival of his annual visitor. Harry glanced up languidly to see a smirking Draco Malfoy standing in the corridor, flanked by his two goons. Conspicuously absent was Malfoy's Prefect's badge. Dumbledore had apparently chosen to relieve him of his duties.

"All alone, Potty? Shame, even the Mudblood and the Weasel King can't stand to be around you these days. So, you know what happens now, right?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. The stupid boy just didn't learn. At least he had somehow managed enough sense to draw his new wand, a rather ugly milky white specimen, before entering.

"I wonder. Nice wand, by the way. Whatever could have happened to your old one?"

Draco reddened slightly, as Crabbe and Goyle flexed their fatty muscles behind him in what they believed to be a threatening manner. Harry just sneered. Hitomi could overpower either of them with ease, and she was roughly half their size. The ferret again spoke for the inept Slytherin party.

"You'll pay, Potter. When my father..."

Harry dismissed the comment with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

"Yes, I'm certain that your father is absolutely terrifying, Malfoy. Speaking of whom, I've heard certain rumors that Lucius likes to frolic with small children. Care to comment?"

Just as a similar jibe had during the will reading, Harry's insult to Draco's father quickly pushed the little wastrel beyond the realms of reasonable thought. He raised his wand and shouted.

"KULDE FRYSER!"

Harry just looked at him, amusement dancing through his forest eyes. He could have easily blasted Draco long before the latter had finished his curse, despite the young Death Eater already having his wand drawn, but decided to take the opportunity to test out his new equipment. The spell that Malfoy had chosen fell under the category of basic Dark Arts. Ideally, the curse caused severe frostbite to spread on the victim's body where the beam impacted. Given the immense power difference between the two wizards, it might have felt akin to a minor mosquito bite on the young dakaathi hybrid's skin.

Harry lazily shifted his right leg upward slightly from where it had been reclining on the table, causing Draco's spell to reflect back in his general direction after colliding with the leg guard, about six inches below Harry's kneecap. The rebounding spell missed Malfoy by a hair, but caught Crabbe right between the eyes. The stupid thug fell to his knees, howling in pain as his face became frostbitten. Harry actually thought the look was a bit of an improvement, doubting that any serious complications would come of it. Malfoy was about as powerful magically as he was physically. He turned his gaze back to a completely flabbergasted Draco and regarded him with a mocking tone.

"Nice spellwork, Draco. Seriously, if you're the best that the new crop of Death Eaters has to offer, Voldemort's going to find himself on his scaly knees begging us for clemency any day now. And for you..."

With a grin, Harry quickly drew his masterpiece wand and made the same tight sweeping arc motion that he had during the will reading. The result was much the same. This time, the blasting curse impacted Malfoy's upper body, shredding his expensive robes and creating a huge bleeding gash from his sternum to his waistline. Harry had placed a bit more force behind the spell than before, and Malfoy was sent flying from the compartment. He collided with the door across the hall and crashed through into that room. He wouldn't

be getting up anytime soon. Crabbe was now writhing on the ground, clawing at his face. That left only Goyle standing. Harry sent a mental command to his two tigers. They rose simultaneously from their sleeping positions at Harry's feet and bore down on Draco's goon, snarling menacingly. Goyle backed down immediately, nearly tripping over Crabbe.

"Call 'em off, Potter! Are you mad or somethin'?"

"So you can talk after all? Keep up the progress and you might even complete toilet training sometime this term. But my two friends missed breakfast, Goyle. We were in such a rush to leave, and a fine, fat specimen like you would make for a perfect brunch..."

Stupid as he was, Gregory Goyle had no chance of being able to discern whether or not Harry was serious. A loud hissing sound filled the room, followed by an acidic stench as Goyle pissed himself from fear and fled for his life, all dignity and concern for his two companions forgotten. With a yawn, Harry banished the whimpering Crabbe from his compartment and into the room across the hall, where Malfoy also lay unconscious. He grabbed Malfoy's new wand from where it had fallen to the floor. He considered snapping it, but decided that he would prefer to avoid another lecture from the old man, and just tossed it in after its owner. He barely had time to recline his feet back into their previous position before a second group of Slytherins stopped by to pay him a visit, decidedly more welcome than the last.

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Right as he was about to finish up, a second explosion impacted closer to his own position. He barely managed not to fall off the seat. The barrage halted for a brief moment, giving Harry enough time to get to his feet, using Khariana as a support, and glance out his compartment window, though he already had an idea as to what was going on.

His suspicions were confirmed. Darting about on broomsticks in the air above the train and firing spells down at the Hogwarts Express was a squad of a dozen Death Eaters. Harry could barely make out the color of their masks, seeing that the assault team consisted of

eleven regulars led by a lieutenant, denoted by his bright silver mask. The regulars wore stone gray. Or so Harry guessed, not really knowing anything about the specific ranks of Voldemort's forces. They were probably fresh recruits, and could be held back by a coordinated defensive effort. Now, he just had to organize one. He judged that there would still be some time before they managed to stop the train, and he intended to make use of it. Wiping his hand off on the seat, Harry turned to regard the three girls, who were looking at him questioningly.

"Death Eaters. I should have guessed that something like this was going to happen. You three get dressed and stay here. I'm going to take a look around."

This attack had interrupted the best time of Harry's young life, and somebody was going to suffer for it. As quickly as his body would allow, he rifled through his trunk, first putting on a pair of socks, and a matching black shirt and trousers. He silently thanked Tonks for getting him some decent muggle clothes for his birthday. His armaments followed, with Harry allowing his wings to tear a pair of holes in his muggle shirt and fit through the slots provided in the breastplate. He then fit on his basilisk hide battle robe for the first time, put on his charmed black dress shoes, girded his masterpiece wand and kodachi to his waist, and strode out of the compartment. On a whim, he also brought along the charmed bottle of medicated water from the village. He left Grindelwald and Khariana with the girls, mostly to avoid cluttering the corridor with their presence. He could call them when he needed them.

Moving down the corridors toward the front of the train, Harry saw Ron and Hermione milling about trying to keep the rest of the students in line. Ron noticed him first.

"Harry, what in the bloody Hell is going on here?"

"Death Eaters, mate. They're trying to stop the train. I'm going to go talk to Cho about getting some kind of defense running. Organize as many DA members as you can in the mean time. We've only got a few minutes at best before they breach the wards on the Hogwarts Express and we're open to attack. Send somebody to the front of the

train to floo up Dumbledore. I'm sure they've got an emergency grate up there."

Hermione came up to them.

"I'll go do that."

Harry nodded and continued on his way, not bothering to calm the terrified students. He had more important things to do. He reached the front compartments quickly enough, and saw both Cho and the Head Boy, Slytherin seventh year and Quidditch player Adrian Pucey, trying to keep things together and make sense of this entire mess. A quick glance out a compartment window revealed that a second team of Death Eaters was attacking the front of the train. Cho saw Harry coming and ran over to him.

"Harry, what's going on around here? Do you know anything?"

Harry rolled his eyes slightly. He cared about Cho, but thought that she should try to be at least a bit more observant during a crisis.

"Death Eaters, Cho. We have two squads of a dozen each attacking from both the front and back. In a few minutes, they'll breach the wards and stop the train. We need to get a defense up and running before that happens. If they manage to get aboard the Hogwarts Express, a lot of people are going to die."

"I'll make an announcement and ask that anybody old enough and willing to fight come up here."

Harry nodded.

"That's a good start. Hermione's already calling up the Headmaster for help."

Cho walked over to an opening on the wall of the Prefects' corridor and grabbed an odd device that looked similar to a hose with a wide opening. She rose the object to her lips and spoke.

“Attention all students. This is an emergency, so listen up. The Hogwarts Express is under attack by Death Eaters. Two full squadrons are besieging the train from both the front and rear as we speak. In a few minutes, the wards protecting us will fall and the train will come to a stop. When that happens, the Death Eaters will assault us in force, and if they manage to get aboard the train, countless lives will potentially be lost. Therefore, we’re going to make sure that doesn’t happen. We’ve already called the school for reinforcements, but we have to hold out until they arrive. Any student fifth year and above that is able and willing to fight and defend the train, please come and assemble at the front compartment. Everyone else, lock your compartment doors and windows and huddle down onto the floor. Keep heart, boys and girls. We’re not going down without a fight. That is all.”

With a sigh, Cho put down the...Harry really had no idea what it was. She walked back over to him and held his hand gently, black eyes shining with worry. He didn’t really blame her. It wasn’t as if she had accepted the Head Girl position expecting to have to lead students into battle. All he could do was pull her a bit closer.

“Did I do okay, Harry?”

“You did fine. Now, let’s wait to hear from Hermione and see who turns up.”

Within ten seconds, students started to file into the corridor. Nearly every upper year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff showed up, along with the majority of the Ravenclaws and a surprising number of Slytherins. Every returning student from the DA was there, and Harry noticed the three girls that had been pleasuring him just a few minutes ago standing nervously at the back. Overall, nearly a hundred students presented themselves. More than Harry had been expecting, actually. Presently, Hermione came back from the engineer’s compartment with her report.

“Okay, Dumbledore’s on his way with the staff, but the Death Eaters have wards up all over the area. It’s going to take them twenty minutes to get here. They’ll have to...”

Ron cut her off, also dressed in his basilisk hide robe.

“Sorry, ‘Mione, but we’ve got no time for detailed explanations. First, we need to decide on a commander.”

Hermione glared slightly, but a fresh barrage of explosions along the ground added emphasis to Ron’s point. As soon as the redhead mentioned needing a commander, almost every pair of eyes in the corridor flew to Harry, who nodded in acceptance and stepped forward. Adrian Pucey bristled slightly at what Harry assumed that the Slytherin thought to be his supposed usurpation of Pucey’s authority as Head Boy, but a sharp glare from Cho caused him to back down, though he remained scowling. Harry completely ignored him and spoke up.

“Okay, everybody, here’s the plan. We’ve got roughly a hundred people total and two fronts to maintain. Obviously, we’re going to have to divide up. Cho and Adrian will be in charge of holding off the frontal squadron up here, and Ron and Hermione are likewise in command against the rear assault. Hermione, Ron, you two go over to the far edge of the compartment, and thirty of the rest of you go with them. Thirty more with Cho and Adrian at the front. I want priority on the defense teams to be given to the best trained among us. You guys know the skills of your classmates better than I do. This is no time to wrangle for glory. However, I want a few Prefects to remain behind with the rest. I have another job for you.”

The students scrambled to follow Harry’s orders. Among the Prefects remaining were Luna Lovegood, Ernie Macmillan, Katie Bell, and Tracey Davis. Harry nodded approvingly and spoke again.

“Ron, Hermione, please lead your team into position at the rear of the train. Prefects, I want each of you to take five or six of the remaining students and form patrol teams. The Death Eaters are our primary concern, but we can’t discount the possibility that those among the current student body that support Voldemort might try to jump into the fight and stage attacks inside the train even as we hold the entrances. I knocked Malfoy out earlier, so I’m not as worried about this as I would have been otherwise, but it’s still an issue. Your jobs will be to

safeguard against it, as well as to relay information between the two fronts. Get to it.”

The rest of the students assembled into patrol teams as ordered and went about their assignments. Harry stayed at the front and watched as Cho and Adrian ordered their people into formation, instructing them to concentrate on defense, and to keep a particular eye out for Killing Curses. Harry trusted that Ron and Hermione would do likewise at the rear. He didn't have long to ponder matters, as a final barrage of spells caused the Hogwarts Express to come grinding to a halt. The battle was on.

Harry observed the battle from his position behind the frontal defensive line. He would have preferred to be up fighting with the others, but it was his responsibility as defense commander to quickly adjust to any changes in circumstances. The Death Eaters' curses had blasted the ceilings off of a few compartments, and Harry took advantage of the newfound openings to take potshots at them with curses of his own as they whizzed by. He actually managed to hit one, who fell off of his broom into the train, landing near Harry's feet. A quick swipe of the kodachi left the Death Eater's throat gushing blood. Harry felt an odd sensation as the crimson flowed along the compartment floor. It was the first time he had actually killed another human being, and he wanted to do it again. He would get his opportunity. A few moments later, a loud whizzing sound signaled the Portkey arrival of four additional squadrons of Death Eaters on foot, facing the main entrance at the center of the Hogwarts Express. A Death Eater in a pure white mask led the main force. A commander, most likely a member of Voldemort's Inner Circle.

With a wave of the commander's hand, the front three squadrons advanced toward the train, keeping a tight formation. The last squadron remained in reserve, as did the commander. Cho's force had its hands full just holding off the aerial assault. Nearly ten among them had fallen, thankfully none with serious injuries, but only three of the enemy squadron had been taken out, including the one Harry had killed. He hoped that Ron's force was faring better. All of the Weasleys had gone with the rear guard, and they were among the most skilled that the DA had to offer, not to mention Hermione, who was probably the best after Harry. Harry quietly left for the main

entrance alone, resolving to use all of his considerable skill to hold off this newest threat, calling for Grindelwald and Khariana as he walked.

Harry arrived quickly enough, steeling himself for what would be the next in his succession of desperate, nearly hopeless battles. It would be Harry and his two pets against forty-nine Death Eaters, including the overall commander. Those weren't good odds, even for a Dumbledore or a Voldemort. Harry closed his eyes and focused his chaotic energy into his palm. He would have to take out this first wave without sustaining any damage. He waited right inside the entrance, feeling the room shake as the Death Eaters closed in and assaulted the door with curses. The entrance blasted open, and Harry likewise opened his forest green eyes and gazed upon the enemy. Lazily, he took aim, and the enemy forces raised their wands again in response.

It was in vain. Harry flung the gathered chaotic energy much as he had that night in the village. The same miniature comet burst forth and exploded into the middle of the formation, the same threads of energy cascading languidly behind. The thirty-six Death Eaters that formed the main assault fared no better than the trees behind Kenzo's house had. Thirty-one human bodies decomposed into glowing rot, the stench of decaying flesh assaulting Harry's nostrils as he breathed heavily from the exertion. Five survived the attack: a group of four grunts at the rear and a lieutenant near the front of the array. Harry could see the shock in their eyes through the slits in the Death Eater masks. He would relieve them of their difficulties.

Harry took only a moment to reflect upon what would happen if his solitary stand failed. He thought of Bellatrix cackling as she tortured Neville into insanity, as she had his parents. He thought of Voldemort killing Hermione with his own hands, yet another victim of the serpentine madman's crazed quest for vengeance against all things muggle, real or imagined. He thought of Draco Malfoy forcing Cho's panties down her toned legs and violently ripping away her innocence, and then allowing Crabbe and Goyle a turn. A truly terrifying smile crossed the face of Harry Alphonse Evans..

These Death Eaters were filth.

Kill.

They deserved no mercy.

Slaughter.

He would slaughter each and every one of them.

Annihilate.

He drew his masterpiece wand, motioning towards the few survivors of his initial assault.

“Novus Incendio. Avada Kedavra.”

An enormous fireball consumed the four regulars, burning their bodies into a smoldering pile of bone and ash. A sickly green wave of death blasted into the lieutenant. He fell, never to rise again. Deep inside Harry's soul, Zharrghast laughed triumphantly. It had finally begun. Harry drew his kodachi and pointed straight at the Death Eater commander. With a borderline Satanic laugh that could only barely be described as coming from his own voice, Harry charged straight toward the remaining thirteen enemies, Grindelwald and Khariana rushing loyally alongside.

Things were not going well for the frontal guard, Cho thought. Fourteen of their number had fallen, one to a Killing Curse. She wasn't able to tell who it was, only that it was a Hufflepuff. She had allowed one of Cedric's housemates to die. Cho wondered if he would have forgiven her for that. More importantly, she wondered if Harry would forgive her. He had trusted her with protecting the lives of their classmates against the evil hordes, and she had already failed him. Speaking of...where was Harry, anyway? He had mysteriously disappeared about five minutes prior, had left without a word. Had he abandoned her to die? No, he had left only because he trusted her, and had gone to secure another front. Not another one of her troops would fall. She would not allow it. Closing her slanted eyes for a split second, she fired off her next volley of spells, her spirit redoubled.

Next to Cho, Adrian was dueling with a Death Eater that touched down behind their lines. Dark curses spewed forth like water from

both wands. Aside from him, six bogeys remained in the sky, raining increasingly violent curses down upon the defenders of Hogwarts. In front of the Chinese Ravenclaw, one of her classmates knocked a Death Eater from his broom with a bludgeoning hex. The enemy soldier fell to the ground and shattered his collarbone upon impact. He would live, but would be in a lot of pain. After his successful hit, Michael Corner turned about and pumped his fist in the air. He didn't see the Death Eater swooping down upon him, wand raised and prepared to end his life.

Cho did, however. Her eyes fierce, she quickly muttered a long complicated incantation in Chinese and pointed her wand. This spell, taught to Cho by her late grandfather, was an ancestral magic passed down through the Chang family. A fork of golden lightning exploded from her wand, severing the head of the approaching Death Eater at the neck, and then branching out to incinerate three others nearby. Blood splashed onto Cho's beautiful china doll face, adding crimson streaks to her shining raven hair. She glanced down at the head that rolled to a stop near her feet. It was Roger Davies, her old Quidditch captain. Tears came to her eyes, but only for a second. With a deft flick of her leg, Cho kicked the offending body part over the edge of the train, glaring contemptuously. Adrian struck down his opponent with a pain curse, and the last enemy fighter fled. The line had held. None of that mattered to her. Cho Li Ling Chang had killed. She would never be the same again.

Things were much the same at the rear guard position. Despite the best efforts of most of the upper year Gryffindors, the Death Eaters just weren't going down. Five of their number had been taken out of the battle, and only one of the enemy. The statistics were absolutely infuriating Ron. He didn't understand that the problem was. They shouldn't be able to be able to dodge that effectively in the downpour outside. A barrage of assorted dark curses took out three more Gryffindors, and Seamus was one of them. He wasn't critically injured, but he'd fight no more this day. Finally, a second Death Eater fell, knocked off his broom by a stunner from one of the twins. Ginny had gotten a third with her patented bat bogey hex, though that one was still technically in the fight. Ron decided to remedy that fact. A quick banishing charm sent the Death Eater cascading to the ground. That left only five. Wait, Ron thought. That couldn't be right. There should

be nearly twice that number. He turned about to see the remaining four Death Eaters landing inside the corridor behind them, having blasted through the ceiling. Ron's squad was pincerred in.

Of course, the disadvantage only lasted for a second, as a barrage of hexes and jinxes from behind felled three of the inside party. Ron blinked for a moment, surprised that their saviors had been Slytherins, of all people. Three cute girls whose names Ron couldn't recall, and a few younger ones. Maybe the snakes weren't all bad after all. The lead one, a girl with a right nice pair of stems, winked at the group and turned about, heading back onto her patrol with the rest of her group. Ron almost forgot about the fourth Death Eater, at least until he came out of hiding and bore down on Hermione with his wand drawn. She was still fighting the scums outside, and had no chance of defending herself.

Ron had no time to cast a spell, nor did he have the inclination to. He grabbed a metal bar that had originally been a part of the ceiling and rushed at the lone Death Eater. Hermione turned about at the last second, brown eyes widening in terror as an unseen enemy began the final syllable of the Killing Curse with his wand aimed right at her head. Visibly resigning herself to the end, her life was saved by Ron, of all people, as he crushed the enemy soldier's skull with a metal bar, and kept beating on the corpse after it had slumped to the ground.

"GOD...DAMNED...BLOODY...SON...OF...A..."

Each screamed expletive signaled another strike with the bar. Hermione watched, both intrigue and horror at the barbaric rage exhibited by her friend flashing through her eyes. As for Ron, he had never felt better. He knew what he felt for Hermione deep down in his heart, even if he would never admit it. He was in love with his constantly nagging friend, and had nearly lost her at the Department of Mysteries. He hadn't even known how close to death she had come, until Harry had told her. And it was Harry and Sirius that had saved her, Merlin bless them for it. But not this time, and not ever again. Ron would be there from now on, for Hermione, and for Harry as well. Killing bastards like this guy to protect his friends and loved ones was something that Ron would do a million times over, and he'd

enjoy it every single time. Ronald Bilius Weasley had killed. He would never be the same again.

From behind Ron, a hulking figure emerged, a similar course of action in mind. Still looking at Ron, Hermione was able to see him approach. It was Vincent Crabbe, face still covered in frostbite from his earlier encounter with Harry. Crabbe had grabbed a huge stone that had fallen from the ruined wall and advanced on Ron, seeking to take the opportunity to avenge the death of one of the Dark Lord's followers. The redhead was too flushed with both rage and pride to bother noticing him. Hermione took aim, her eyes blazing with determination to repay her friend's protective devotion in kind.

"Ballano!"

This basic spell, perfectly legal, caused a large gray ball to fly at a high speed towards the opponent, usually with enough force to render them unconscious. However, Crabbe's flesh and bone had been severely weakened by the frostbite, and when the ball made contact with the skin on his face, it broke right through, shattering his skull and spraying blood and brain matter all over the floor, an obviously fatal blow. Hermione dropped her wand in shock. Ron whirled about on the spot, seeing what she had done. Even in the heat of a battle, Hermione dropped to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably. Ron looked on sympathetically, knowing her scruples for what they were. Even if it was one of Malfoy's goons, who would have gladly done as much and worse to her given the chance, Hermione couldn't bear the thought of what she had just done. Ron did the only thing he could, neglecting the battle himself and giving her a hug and a shoulder to cry onto. Hermione Anne Granger had killed. She would never be the same again.

Oblivious to the plight of Harry's two friends, the rest of the rear guard battled the five remaining Death Eaters in the air. The battle was still going badly, as four more Gryffindors had fallen. Colin Creevey had taken a powerful blasting curse to the chest and was bleeding profusely. He likely wouldn't survive. The twins backed off the battle for a moment and ran into a nearby compartment, carrying a box of something as they returned. Wearing identical smirks, they placed the

box just outside the front line and told their comrades to back off. They raised their wands and spoke as one.

“Incendio!”

The box was filled with their patented Filibuster Fireworks that had been utilized to such great effectiveness in protest of Dolores Umbridge the previous year. Nearly four dozen of them lit and exploded from the box, soaring through the air towards the confused Death Eaters. The air around the rear of the train exploded in an aurora of colorful fire despite the rain outside, setting three Death Eaters ablaze and incinerating their brooms. The Death Eater lieutenant motioned for his last remaining soldier to abandon the attack, and the celebration commenced. The heroes of Gryffindor had emerged victorious.

Harry held his kodachi behind his body as he charged headlong into the array of the remaining Death Eater squadron. He cared not for the progress of the battle inside the train at the moment. His dakaathi bloodlust was burning too strong, and his one desire was to sate it. Still laughing maniacally, he charged up the kodachi with chaotic energy, ignoring the fatigue that still gripped him from his previous effort. He was nearing the enemy now, and they were starting to shift their formation to meet his crazed attack, firing curses that either missed or deflected uselessly off of his assorted armaments. Grindelwald and Khariana separated themselves from Harry, running around on either side to attack the Death Eater flanks as the fodder concentrated on their master. Harry prepared a spell, a sickly yellow buzzsaw of pure magical energy forming on his wand as he ran. He released it with an incantation as he reached the enemy front line.

“Merhersag!”

The blade tore through the enemy ranks, slicing a good two or three Death Eaters apart at the torso as it zipped along. Harry leapt into the untouched part of their center line, slashing his kodachi about in a fury, cutting down every enemy in its path with chaotic power. Harry found himself in the center of a general melee, and all sides turned about to attack him. Blood poured in torrents to match the rainfall, and Harry became nearly drunk on the taste. Meanwhile, the Death Eaters had quickly learned that getting near him was suicide, and

backed off. He was now forced to fight with his wand, surrounded, though only eight enemies remained, including the commander, who had still not made a move and was watching him guardedly. He darted about to avoid Killing Curses and deflected the rest both with his gauntlets and with protection spells, countering with curses of his own. He saw one Death Eater taking aim, and decided instead to take the initiative.

“Glycolycium!”

The spell sped up the target’s rate of cellular respiration a thousand times over, causing the body to overload with excess metabolic energy and burn from the inside out. A most painful way to go, as one unfortunate Death Eater was finding out. Harry slid backward, dodging the next volley of Unforgivables. He was rather disappointed with the lack of variety being exhibited.

“Stein Skulptor! Abolesco! Neken!”

Three more fell, one turning to stone and shattering with a second wave of Harry’s wand, the other two bleeding to death internally and having his lungs figuratively torn apart, respectively. Meanwhile, Grindelwald and Khariana reached the cluster and tore into the flanks like a pair of whirling dervishes, teeth and claws shredding apart the two Death Eaters within immediate reach. The male beast’s victim melted into a puddle of boiling liquid, while the female’s solidified at the subcellular level. After a final exchange of curses, the last regular Death Eater fell dead, leaving only Harry and the commander remaining on the bloodstained battlefield. Harry flipped his drenched hair and exposed his scar, and his final opponent strode forward.

“Quite impressive, ickle wee Potter. Didn’t think you had it in you, all this killing. And you’re pretty good at it, too. I can’t wait to see what else you’ve learned.”

Harry could recognize that voice anywhere. The cryptic smile remained on his face. He’d show her exactly just how much he’d picked up. It would make for a most fascinating exhibition.

“Bella...sweetheart...I’ve missed you. Tell me, how’s your husband doing?”

Bellatrix Lestrange removed her mask, heavy lidded violet eyes glistening in the rain. Her smile was torn between being mocking and genuine. She wasn't going to be provoked into making mistakes as easily as the likes of Draco and his ilk could typically be. He had managed to anger the madwoman at the Ministry, but that hadn't been an actual duel. She would be much more collected here.

"Oh, he's been better, though Azkaban is hardly a new experience for him, now is it? Now you tell me something. What did it feel like, killing your first?"

"Why, natural, Bella darling. It felt like the most natural thing in the world."

Bellatrix nodded quickly, as Harry pondered just how to open against her. This wasn't going to be an easy battle, and he was already half exhausted. Perhaps he could catch her off her guard and end it without exerting any effort. He doubted it, but it was worth trying.

"Natural, you say? You felt no hate, no desire for more? Are you lying to me, Harry?"

"Would I ever lie to you, my love? Avada Kedavra."

Bellatrix blanched slightly at the unexpected attack, but swayed back to avoid the lethal curse and took aim with her own wand at the same time.

"Crucio! Syre Pil!"

"Protego."

Harry blocked the Cruciatus Curse and dodged the incoming jet of acid. It burned a hole in the ground where he had been standing. He jabbed his wand at Bellatrix and then held it like a sword and pulled backward, first sending a spray of boiling oil at her. She blocked that with a nameless protection spell, but only noticed the tree falling behind her at the last second and moved out of the way. Harry was prepared to continue the pressure.

“Deletrius.”

Bellatrix shrieked and ducked the latest attack. It struck another tree behind her, which wavered for a moment and then phased out of existence. Now serious about the fight, the Death Eater unleashed a barrage of her own, culminating with her stabbing her wand towards the ground like a stake.

“Stupefy! Neken! Morendo!”

Harry deflected the stunner with a swirl of his battle robes, and flipped out of the way of the two darker curses. He was a split second too late in noticing the stone spikes shooting up from the ground below him. One caught him on the upper portion of his right leg, drawing blood and causing him to draw back with a grimace. Bellatrix sneered.

“Looks like I draw first blood today, loverboy. Crucio!”

“Can’t you come up with anything better?”

Harry moved gingerly out of the way of the Unforgivable. The sneer never left his opponent’s face, instead broadening.

“Careful, wee Potter. Words like those sent my cousin Sirius to his death.”

Harry wasn't fazed by the obvious attempt to rile him up.

“Point taken. Novus Incendio.”

Bellatrix rolled forward to avoid the fireball but found herself dangerously close to Harry as a result. With quick footwork, she dodged the series of five kodachi swipes, but got caught with a roundhouse kick to the stomach from Harry’s uninjured leg that sent her sprawling to the ground. Harry immediately pressed his advantage.

“Watch that gut, Bella darling. Pugile.”

She was unable to regain her bearings in time, and took the powerful bludgeoning hex on the right shoulder, splintering the bone. Her wand flew from her hand into the mess of corpses nearby. Harry took a step forward, leveling his wand at the defeated Death Eater. He decided not to kill her. She was too useful to him, what with her unknowingly informing him of Voldemort's plans through Narcissa. However, he could still have some fun with her. Glancing over towards the train, Harry saw that the mounted Death Eaters were no longer hovering about, meaning either that the students had defeated them, or they had boarded the train and were slaughtering at will. While he was looking away, Bellatrix had quickly drawn a second wand from inside her robes. Harry wasn't able to react in time.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

His eyes widened as the Killing Curse impacted him directly in the chest. The pain was immeasurable, as not even his arkanite breastplate could completely absorb a spell with as much sheer power and hatred behind it as what Bellatrix had sent. The beam washed over Harry's entire body, bathing him in an emerald green light. He fell to a knee as Bellatrix rose to her feet, screaming victoriously as she had upon killing Sirius. Soon enough, the pain began to subside, and Harry rose again. Bellatrix turned about immediately, shocked beyond words at seeing him alive and back on his feet.

"You look so surprised, my love. Surely you didn't actually believe that you could kill me? Not even your master is capable of that, despite what he would have you believe. Crucio."

There was no righteous anger this time, and Harry could easily summon up enough pure malice to properly use the Cruciatus Curse upon this particular witch. He reveled in her screams, watching with morbid fascination as her back arched from the pain and blood and froth started to pour out through her mouth after a few minutes.

"Do you want me to let you go, Bella? Will you appeal to the dark prince's compassion?"

She couldn't answer, obviously, but he could see the pleading within the woman's eyes.

"You do, don't you? Well, I have no compassion for you, I'm sorry to note. It's the Longbottom ward for you, darling. Rather poetic justice, I'd say. I can only imagine the enlightening conversations you'll be able to have with Frank and Alice, with all of you drooling onto yourselves day in and day out. Enjoy the fruits of your labors, Bellatrix."

Her screams just became increasingly tortured, and her eyes began to shift out of focus. Eventually, Harry released the curse. She couldn't tell tales to her sister as a vegetable, after all. Bellatrix writhed pathetically on the ground, her body nearly broken, living testament to the extent of Harry's cruelty when properly roused. He turned to leave her to her misery, but then decided at the last second to inflict one final indignity upon the woman. He leveled his masterpiece wand languidly.

"Bovini Magus."

Now shaking on the ground was a wasted, violet-eyed dairy cow. Bovine Bella wasn't even aware of her own existence at the moment, and Harry only wished that he could be around when she discovered her state. He started to walk back to the train, seeing the Headmaster approaching down the tracks from the distance, along with the rest of his teaching staff. As per the usual, the fight was over by the time the old man managed to show up.

"Hope you like grazing, Bella dear. I daresay nobody's going to find you for a good while yet. Until the next date, love. I'll send flowers."

Chuckling to himself, Harry stalked over the litter of corpses that his bloodlust had left in its wake, not caring in the slightest about what he had just done. He only hoped that his friends back aboard the Hogwarts Express had managed to avoid any serious tragedy. Despite his attempts at acting nonchalant, he was aching all over and completely exhausted. That duel with Bellatrix had really depleted the last of his reserves.

(End Chapter Twelve)

Well, there's the next chapter, and our first big battle scene. I hope you enjoyed it. I originally was going to have Bella's force at six squadrons, but was advised, and perhaps rightfully so, that having Harry charge alone into a field of nearly forty Death Eaters at the end and walk out unscathed wasn't very realistic. Still, I hope I've mollified any concerns about Harry not being powerful enough. And, I am completely exhausted, so I hope you'll forgive the brevity of this note. I'd like to ask for input about how I handled the battle scene, particularly the Harry/Bella duel, but other aspects as well. Until the next time, amigos.

Many of the spells used in this chapter are borrowed from Damien Darkstar's excellent "Spells & Creatures" compilation. Take a look at it, good stuff.

“Hope you like grazing, Bella dear. I daresay nobody’s going to find you for a good while yet. Until the next date, love. I’ll send flowers.”

Chuckling to himself, Harry stalked over the litter of corpses that his bloodlust had left in its wake, not caring in the slightest about what he had just done. He only hoped that his friends back aboard the Hogwarts Express had managed to avoid any serious tragedy. Despite his attempts at acting nonchalant, he was aching all over and completely exhausted. That duel with Bellatrix had really depleted the last of his reserves.

Chapter Thirteen: Aftermath – Shifting Allegiances

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry splashed blood about as he walked through the river of gore that ran across the battlefield. He really had made a mess. His breastplate was somehow undamaged from Bellatrix’s Killing Curse, but his body felt as if it had been run through a torture chamber. The decomposed gelatinous rot of the advance wave still glowed ominously near the entrance to the Hogwarts Express. He nearly tripped over a large stone as he trudged along. Looking down, he noticed that it was a part of a Death Eater’s head, the one that Harry had petrified and shattered during his crazed charge. Even the internal organs had been turned to stone. He picked the fragment up and dashed it against the ground, completely shattering it. He took his time as he moved, fully content to allow the old man and his cronies to observe the damage before making his appearance. Surveying for himself, Harry saw that the train was completely ruined. Only the middle third remained relatively intact, and even it had taken significant damage from Bellatrix’s ground troops.

As the adrenaline pumping through him began to subside, Harry felt a sharp pain in his right leg, where he had been impaled by a stone spike during his duel with the insane bitch. He grabbed the bottle of medicated water from inside his battle robes, relieved to see that it had somehow survived the battle, and poured a liberal amount onto his wound. He watched as the solution worked its magic and the gash healed over, leaving only a slight scar behind. The rainfall intensified

as he walked on, washing some of the blood and gore from his body, though by no means cleaning him. Presently, he reached the ruined entrance to the train and stepped in, drawing his battle robes around his body in order to hide his wings.

The faculty had arrived before him and were moving about in a hurry along with other Order members, calming the distraught students and attempting to treat the injured. Some would require further medical attention at Hogwarts, and others would not survive, but most of the injuries were relatively light. As for Harry, he figured that Dumbledore would likely be at the front of the train, and headed for the rear to check on Ron and Hermione, hoping to delay having to deal with the old man for a short while. Upon reaching his destination, he saw a bawling Dennis Creevey comforting his older brother during his last moments. Harry could clearly see that Colin wasn't going to live. He placed a hand on the younger Creevey's shoulder for a second, and then moved on without a word, knowing from his memories of himself after Sirius's death that nothing he could say would be of any help to the young Gryffindor.

Catching up to his friends, he saw Ron holding a sobbing Hermione as McGonagall interrogated the twins. Bill and Fleur were also among the Order members present, as were Arthur and Molly. Harry wasn't sure whether or not Fleur was in the Order, but she was with her boyfriend regardless. Bill had received some emergency aid training during his days as a curse breaker, and was seeing to the injured Gryffindors. Harry leaned against a ruined compartment entrance, noting that his own had survived. Looking into the parallel room, he saw that Malfoy had long since disappeared and was likely cowering somewhere. He slid over and secured his bags, listening to McGonagall rant and rave.

"And where is Potter? Has anybody seen him?"

One of the twins, Harry couldn't tell which, answered the Deputy Headmistress. He still hadn't made his presence known yet.

"Sorry, professor. He stayed up front with the others when we came back here, and apparently went somewhere during the fight. None of the patrol teams have seen him."

"I can't imagine him abandoning his schoolmates. Where could he have gotten to?"

Harry decided to come out of hiding.

"I'm here, professor."

The woman turned about on the spot.

"Oh, thank Merlin! Potter, what happened here?"

"That's rather obvious, isn't it? Death Eaters attacked the train, and since the almighty Albus Dumbledore couldn't see fit to put measures in place to properly protect us, we were forced into taking action for ourselves. All circumstances taken into account, I'd say we did a pretty damn good job. Unfortunately, we did take some casualties..."

Several angry glares and nods accompanied Harry's criticism of the Headmaster. Looking over into Ron's eyes, Harry saw a hardness that wasn't there earlier. Something had changed inside him during the battle, and from the corpses on the ground near his two best friends, Harry could guess what it was. Ron had killed a man today, and so had Hermione, it seemed. McGonagall seemed to want to defend the old man, but couldn't find anything to say. She was saved from being forced to reply by the timely arrival of Severus Snape.

"Potter, the Headmaster wishes to speak with you. Come with me."

Harry looked over to his most hated professor and saw none of the usual contempt within the man's coal black eyes. Rather, he was looking at Harry as if truly seeing him for the first time. There was even a hint of grudging respect present, though Harry was certain that nothing at all had really changed between the two of them. With a curt nod, Harry followed the man. As expected, the peace didn't last long, as Snape couldn't resist the urge to take one of his usual digs at Harry as they walked.

“So, Potter, I hear that you were miraculously absent from both fronts of your little battle today. Too afraid to risk your own hide? How very lacking in Gryffindor courage you are.”

Harry wasn't about to rise to the man's bait.

“Oh, I was simply out flaunting my celebrity elsewhere, Snivellus. Take a look out the main entrance if you care to see the result.”

Snape did indeed glance out the ruined entrance to the train as he walked by. What he saw made him stop in his tracks. Nearly twenty dead corpses, along with a huge cesspool of glowing rot that the man couldn't even begin to identify. A lone figure writhed about on the ground in the distance, as if having been subjected to an intense, prolonged bout of the Cruciatus. It almost looked like a cow, but Snape seemed unable to tell for sure from the distance, at least from what Harry could see. The greasy man's eyes darted back to Harry, as he spoke in a slightly breathless voice.

“Do you mean to tell me that this is your handiwork, Potter? You honestly expect me to believe that you are capable of dispatching several squadrons of the Dark Lord's followers on your own? Do not mistake me for a fool, boy.”

Harry shrugged.

“I don't really care what you believe. Now let's go, wouldn't want to keep the old man waiting.”

“You will address the Headmaster with the proper respect, Pott...”

Snape halted his sneering reprimand upon noticing that Harry had continued on without him. As for Harry, he received several appreciative nods from his fellow students as he passed. Arriving at the front compartment, he saw Dumbledore talking to Cho and Adrian as Madam Pomfrey, along with Professors Flitwick and Sprout tended to the injured. With the school mediwitch present, the injured were looking much better off on this end. Many of the students that had fought were muttering angrily to themselves, especially the Ravenclaws. Cho's obsidian eyes were burning with discontent, and

Harry could see annoyance at having to listen to the old man's prattling etched onto her delicate face. Absentmindedly noticing that he was still holding his kodachi, Harry sheathed the blade at his waist. The sound drew the attention of those gathered. Cho tried to tackle him in a hug, but he caught her halfway and pulled her in gently, not wanting her to knock her head against his unforgiving breastplate. He ran a finger along her bloodstained face as she looked up at him.

"Where have you been, Harry? I was so worried..."

"I know, Cho. I didn't mean to leave, but somebody had to take care of the main force and you all had your hands full here. Good job holding the scum back. Did your side lose anybody?"

Cho nodded sadly.

"Yeah, Zacharias Smith was killed during the fighting. Oh, I'm so sorry..."

Harry had never really liked the cynical Hufflepuff, but had a newfound respect for him after the boy had given his life to protect his classmates. Still, Cho had no business blaming herself for his death.

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault."

Harry continued to hold the girl as Dumbledore walked up to them.

"Harry, I am relieved to see that you are safe. You say you fought off their main force? You were able to do this on your own?"

Harry nodded.

"Yes, professor. About fifty of them arrived on foot while our lines were busy with holding back the aerial assault. I kept them back somehow, but I'm tired and sore as all Hell now."

The old man smiled grimly, eyes twinkling. It wasn't to last for long.

"I can imagine so. The Death Eaters eventually retreated, I take it?"

Snape finally came walking up, and decided to jump into the conversation.

“No, Headmaster. Potter here claims to be responsible for the scene outside.”

Dumbledore, who apparently hadn't yet seen the slaughtered remnants of the main force, strode over to a nearby compartment window and gazed outside. The old man turned as white as a sheet upon viewing the carnage and turned back to Harry. His tone was as forceful and severe as Harry had ever heard it.

“You did this, Harry? You killed those people?”

The dakaathi hybrid met his tone with one radiating cold fury. He wasn't about to take this crap from Dumbledore. Not this time.

“Yes, I did...fifty of them. I did what had to be done, to protect my classmates. Would you have preferred to see two hundred defenseless children dead in here instead? You have a sworn duty as Headmaster to safeguard the students, Dumbledore, and you failed miserably at it today. You have no right whatsoever to chastise any of us protecting ourselves. I'm not the only one among us that took a life today. Look around you, old man. Can you see the anger burning in the eyes of these young men and women? I've been back at the rear line, and they're all every bit as pissed. We all lost our innocence today because of your gross ineptitude. I didn't step onto the Hogwarts Express this morning planning to have to lead a small army of students into battle, and they came here to ride to school, not to be forced to brave the slings and arrows of combat. But we fought regardless, because we had no other choice. We're no longer children, and we don't want to hear your humanitarian rubbish. This is a war, in case you haven't noticed, and in war, people die.”

The old man drew himself up, both righteous anger and sorrowful regret flashing through his eyes. Harry had been hoping to stave off a direct showdown with Dumbledore for as long as possible, but now was as good a time as any. Discontent among the students was at a peak following the old man's blunder, and Harry was handed a perfect opportunity to spray petrol onto the fire. The assorted nods

and shouts that accompanied his diatribe made it clear that the effort was paying off. Still, the Headmaster wasn't ready to admit defeat yet.

"Be that as it may, Harry, they are still human beings, and I..."

"No, they are not. They tossed aside their humanity the day they knelt before Voldemort and accepted his mark, swearing to pillage and kill in the name of his madness. They're no better than base animals and I have absolutely no regrets about having to tear them apart in defense of my friends and classmates."

There were tears in the old man's eyes now. Harry almost felt guilty, or would have if his dakaathi nature would have allowed for it. He wasn't about to stop now, though.

"You truly believe that, Harry? You believe that all Death Eaters are mere swine, totally incapable of human thoughts and feelings, completely undeserving of any chance at redemption? Do you honestly presume to have the right to make that judgment?"

Albus Dumbledore was a worthy opponent. Flickers of doubt were beginning to appear in the eyes of Harry's supporters. Still, he knew that he could come out of this victoriously.

"I believe that any man or woman that is both willing and eager to torture and kill innocent children for some psychopath's amusement deserves to be granted no quarter. They made their choice, and they paid for it. Such conviction brought me to survive against nearly impossible odds today, and allowed a small, hastily assembled group of Hogwarts students to defeat a better trained and equipped force of adult dark wizards and witches."

The old man hung his head. The students continued to show their support for the young wizard that had led them to victory. From her position nestled in Harry's arms, Cho wore a mysterious smile. Snape looked positively murderous, but didn't dare to take a stand against Harry right then. Sprout was beside herself, and came over to console the Headmaster. Flitwick had a calculating expression on his face, as if pondering the validity what Harry had just said. He looked decidedly impressed with the young wizard for standing up to

Dumbledore, at the very least. Harry looked around, noticing that the crowd had increased from earlier. Many of the Gryffindors and Slytherins that had fought in the battle were now assembled in the compartment, along with some students that hadn't. Eventually, the old man regained his bearings.

"It truly saddens me that you feel this way, Harry. I had thought better of you. However, the fact remains that we are currently aboard a ruined train in the middle of the Scottish highlands. We must make plans to transport the students to school. I will create the necessary Portkeys. Staff, please assemble the students and organize them into groups of fifty. Harry, I would like to see you in my office tomorrow afternoon."

Harry nodded in acceptance, having already scored his victory over the old man. It certainly seemed as if he would now easily find the necessary support within the student body to form that splinter faction. Perhaps the attack had been a blessing in disguise. Voldemort's assault had only served to further Harry's cause. The sojourn to Hogwarts occurred without any particular incident, and Harry found himself outside on the grounds, where he would normally have debarked from the carriages. Hearing Hagrid's traditional start of term shout returned a small sense of normalcy to the rattled students.

"Firs' years, o'er here!"

Some time later, a solitary figure apparated onto the battlefield outside the ruined Hogwarts Express. Lord Voldemort had heard no news from those assigned to attack the train, and had come to investigate, as well as accordingly punish his reconnaissance operatives for failing to report. The Dark Lord was not in the least prepared for the scene that greeted him. His entire ground force had been wiped out, slaughtered. This was not the work of Dumbledore and his pathetic Order of the Phoenix. The old fool had never been willing to use lethal force, perhaps the greatest of his many failings as a leader. Voldemort surveyed the damage as he walked about, careless of the blood and gore at his feet.

A squadron at the rear of the battlefield had been killed by more or less conventional means, at least from his perspective. One had been petrified and shattered, and two more incinerated by differing spells.

The first had fallen victim to the metabolic burning curse, one of his personal favorites, a most painful spell. The other had been literally melted into a pool of goo, a spell that Voldemort had never seen before. One was frozen completely solid and likely had been for hours, again through a spell that he didn't recognize, and a few more had been cut apart. Crimson eyes narrowed slightly, at the same time dancing with glee. This had been the work of a very powerful student of the Dark Arts. Not even the best of Voldemort's followers could handle some of these spells without extreme difficulty, and judging from the arrangement of the corpses, this individual had done them on the move. Besides, only a spellcaster of extreme power could have been able to overcome Bella. Losing her would be regrettable, but not necessarily extremely detrimental to his cause. He could easily find another whore to bear his seed, and Voldemort would sacrifice most of his Inner Circle in order to procure the services of whoever had created this carnage, to say nothing of just Bella and a few squadrons of the rank and file.

The Dark Lord glanced over to his right, noticing a bloody dairy cow standing on her feet and looking straight at him, almost as if expecting something. For such a base creature to dare to look Lord Voldemort in the face was tantamount to begging for death, and he would happily provide. Voldemort raised his yew wand.

"Avada..."

The decidedly skeletal cow's eyes widened slightly, almost as if she knew what he was about to do to her. That made Voldemort curious. Looking back at the creature, he finally realized who she was. He could recognize those violet eyes silently begging for mercy anywhere. Bella. So, she was alive after all, and judging by the way that she was twitching, she had suffered through some serious torture. That pleased the Dark Lord, though he would still personally punish her for her failure later. Voldemort couldn't stop himself from chuckling slightly. This new adversary, whoever he or she was, definitely had a sense of humor. Voldemort found himself liking the person more and more by the second. Sighing, he reversed the spell on Bella. He would have preferred to leave her in her undignified state, but he needed to know what had taken place here.

“Anthropi Magus.”

Bella returned to her normal, only marginally more attractive state, and immediately proceeded to prostrate herself before her master, kissing at his robes despite the blood and tissue matter present. Voldemort found the display amusingly revolting, and kicked the woman off of him, prompting a fit of wailing.

“Master, please don’t punish me! It wasn’t my fault! It was that...”

“Silence, Bella. Now tell me, who or what could have overcome four squadrons of my faithful supporters led by one of my Inner Circle?”

“It...it was the Potter brat, my lord. He killed the entire advance force with one attack and cut apart the rest in under a minute. I hit him with a killing curse, master, but he just shrugged it off with ease. Please don’t be angry with me!”

Voldemort found that hard to believe, but also very disturbing if it was indeed true. Harry Potter, the celebrated icon of the light, had used the most forbidden of the Dark Arts and slaughtered other human beings by the dozen. And the advance force Bella had spoken of. Looking over toward the train, he saw an unrecognizable pile of rot glowing faintly. Such an attack...there was nothing even remotely like it within the confines of the known magical sphere.

“Do you speak the truth, Bella? Harry Potter did this?”

“Yes, master. He did it all by himself, the rest of his student army was fighting against the aerial force.”

“I see...this is a most unexpected turn of events.”

Unexpected, but potentially very rewarding for Voldemort, or at least he thought. If Potter had done this, then he was no doubt now at severe odds with the old man as a result, and would probably soon face trouble from the buffoons at the Ministry as well. Perhaps it was time for the Dark Lord to repeat his offer of four years ago. If the boy could be induced to come over to his side, the morale of the wizarding world would be completely crushed, and Voldemort would

have solved his problem of succession as well as gain immediate access to Potter's hefty fortune and extremely potent magical power. Yes, Lucius's useless brat had immediately informed him of Potter's ascendancy to the lordship of the Black line. And not even Dumbledore could hope to stand against both Potter and Lord Voldemort. It was only a matter of making the brat a sufficiently lucrative offer to accompany the promise of a position as Voldemort's heir. But for now...

"Indeed unexpected, my lord..."

"Bella..."

"Yes, master?"

"You know the price of failure. Crucio."

Bellatrix Lestrange's screams filled the damp Scottish evening air as Voldemort opened his cloak slightly, unfurling and flexing a pair of midnight black wings.

Harry had largely ignored the goings on during the Sorting Ceremony. He really didn't much care about the first years or their house placement. They were too young to be of much use to him. Protecting them had only been a matter of political convenience for Harry, as well as an excuse to finally be able to flex his magical muscle. And now, Dumbledore was about to make the staff announcements for the upcoming year. Harry decided to pay attention, seeing as this would concern him, at least in DADA. He did notice, looking at the staff table, that Filch was furious about something. He must have already seen that the Weasley twins were back for another year.

"First, please join me in welcoming back to the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Professor Alastor Moody!"

Mild applause greeted Moody's slow trek to the Head Table. Hogwarts had experienced the teaching of an impersonator of the man, and now it would get the real thing. Of course, only a select few knew about the presence of Barty Crouch, Jr. within the castle a few years back. Harry was annoyed with the announcement. He could learn a lot from the retired auror, but moving about the castle

undetected would now be exponentially more difficult due to his infernal magical eye. Dumbledore motioned for the applause to stop and continued.

"I imagine that you'll all find Defense class much more tolerable this year than last. However, I would like to announce the instructor for our Magical Stealth and Tracking course, a new optional elective offered to NEWT level students. This class is being offered as an aid to students interested in applying to enter into the auror ranks upon graduating from this institution. Professor Moody had initially volunteered to teach it, but I feel that it is most important that his energies be focused on Defense Against the Dark Arts. However, I was most fortunate to find that a lovely young lady had just moved into Hogsmeade last week from Japan..."

Harry blanched at that. A lovely young Japanese woman that had just moved into Hogsmeade. He knew right then and there what was coming, and was both infinitely pleased and extremely pissed off by the prospect. She had never been to Japan in her life. At least she had been able to fool the old man that far...

"Please welcome to Hogwarts, Professor Hitomi Kurahawa!"

Hitomi made a show of appearing out of nowhere right next to her chair, drawing a few amorous looks from some of the boys in the Great Hall. Taking her seat, she immediately sought out Harry's eyes and smirked, mouthing something at him. He shook his head and looked down at his plate. What had she been thinking? He did want to see her again, and even begrudgingly found it rather cute that she had actually followed him, but was not at all happy with the idea of her staying at Hogwarts, and as one of his own instructors no less. He would have to make it through lessons with her and somehow avoid letting anybody catch on to the fact that they were intimate. Harry's enemies inside the school would have a field day with that information, not to mention the massive explosion that would invariably occur if and when a certain Chinese Fireball sitting over at the Ravenclaw Table happened to find out about them. At the very least, Hitomi could have given him some advance warning. Harry's life had just become much more complicated.

The feast finally commenced, much to Harry's satisfaction. He was famished, having exerted himself completely during the battle earlier. Upon arriving at school, he had allowed his two pets to have the run of the grounds. They'd be happily occupied for awhile, at least. As he ate, Harry was asked to recount the events of his battle with Bellatrix's forces outside the train. Everybody in Gryffindor listened as Harry told the story, and he met with surprisingly little outrage upon revealing that he had killed the Death Eaters wholesale. Hermione was absolutely horrified, but kept her own counsel. Most of the others were either sympathetic or neutral. Harry's leadership during the fight had not been lost on his housemates. Neville had been particularly interested in his duel with Bellatrix herself, and had nearly choked upon hearing that Harry had turned her into a cow and left her that way.

Eventually, he was left talking to Ron.

"So, mate, how do you like that new Stealth professor? Quite the looker, eh?"

Harry glanced over to his friend and spoke in quiet voice.

"Definitely. I'd like to get inside those robes."

"Better not say that too loud, Harry. Wouldn't want Cho finding out, would we?"

Harry answered Ron's amused expression with one of his own.

"Don't even joke about that, mate. You know she blasted somebody's head off today? And how did you find out that we were an item again, anyway?"

"No kidding? Damn, that's heavy. As for finding out, gossip travels fast around this joint. You ought to know that by now. Besides, you two weren't exactly secretive about it, from what I hear."

That was true, but having accomplished his actual goal of veering the subject away from Hitomi, Harry kept Ron occupied with talk of the battle for the remainder of the feast. Hermione stayed quiet, for the

most part absorbed in her own thoughts. Soon enough, the meal ended, and Dumbledore rose to give another speech. Harry truly hoped that it would be the last of the night.

“Now that we’ve all tucked in, I must address a most serious matter. Today, Lord Voldemort’s forces assaulted the Hogwarts Express. Unfortunately, the attack was planned and executed in a manner that prevented both myself and the staff from reaching the location in a timely fashion. The potential loss of life among the student body was indeed staggering. However, the student body was protected thanks to the heroic efforts of nearly one hundred extraordinarily brave young men and women, a few of whom lost their lives today. Let us first observe a moment of silence for the following students: Colin Creevey of Gryffindor House, Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff House, and Vincent Crabbe of Slytherin House. Let us honor as well as the many students wounded in the defense effort, and the multitudes among the ranks of the Death Eaters that perished in the day’s assault.”

Nobody spoke during the observed moment, though the old man received his share of nasty looks for propounding the notion that the fallen Death Eaters should be honored. The brief respite ended, and Dumbledore spoke again.

“Today’s victory was won with the mutual cooperation of students from all of the four houses of Hogwarts. Slytherins fought alongside Gryffindors, and Ravenclaws toiled alongside Hufflepuffs. Let this be a standing testament to what can be accomplished when we all join hands together. As long as hope and spirit exists within each of us, the forces of darkness can never extinguish the glow of the light. We are all in this struggle together, and only through embracing one another can we hope to overcome the tumultuous times ahead. The loss of life on both sides was indeed regrettable, but nevertheless, this day will long be remembered as a crushing victory for the forces of the light, a day during which a hastily assembled army of Hogwarts students convincingly defeated the hordes of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Exceptional deeds deserve exceptional rewards, and I would now like for each and every student that braved the horrors of war this day to stand and be recognized.”

Every student that had fought in and survived the battle and was in condition to attend the feast stood. Dumbledore announced each of them by name, to the frenzied applause of the staff and the younger students. Harry found the entire ceremony to be largely unnecessary, and a part of him believed that it was only Dumbledore making an attempt to get back into the good graces of the student body. Harry wasn't mentioned by name during this general listing.

"...To each of these students, I am privileged to award twenty house points. Congratulations to all of you, and you have our eternal gratitude. And finally, I have one more person to recognize. This young man has long been a steadfast hero and a shining example to us all. He has suffered more in his short life than those three times his age should ever have to. Today, he responded quickly to the enemy threat, organized and commanded the resistance, and stood alone against a charge of nearly fifty Death Eaters, exerting all of his energies to protect his friends and classmates. He duelled and defeated one of Voldemort's most dreaded commanders, and very nearly paid the ultimate price for his efforts. It is my honor to award one hundred house points to Gryffindor in the name of Harry James Potter."

Harry found it amusing that Dumbledore failed to mention how he had dealt with the Death Eaters. He hadn't remembered telling the old man about the duel with Bellatrix either, though news tended to travel notoriously fast at Hogwarts, just as Ron had just said. Somebody had probably seen them fighting and had spread it around. At any rate, Harry received a standing ovation from the majority of the school. Only a few students in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw remained seated, as did about half of the Slytherins. Dumbledore smiled jovially, but Harry thought he could see an underlying look of concern in his twinkling eyes. It was to be expected, though. Harry had directly challenged the old man earlier, and doubted that he had seen the end of it yet.

"We have all had a most taxing day. The feast is now at an end, and I'll not subject you to the annual rendition of the school song. Good night, students. Sleep well, and good luck with your studies. Have an excellent term."

And so, the Sorting Feast ended. Most of Gryffindor headed for the dormitories, but Harry had other plans for the evening. He gave his

trunk to Ron to take up into their room, and headed off into the corridors alone. He wasn't looking for anything in particular. Rather, he was waiting for a certain somebody to find him. He wanted some answers. First, though, he stopped in the Room of Requirement. He desperately required a hot shower, and took one in the produced stall. He also tossed a few quick cleaning charms onto his battle outfit, and then rinsed and dried it. After that, he continued prowling about the castle, and was eventually intercepted by his target and pulled quickly into a darkened empty classroom.

"Hey there, Harry."

He frowned slightly back at his first lover and now professor.

"Tell me, just what in Merlin's name are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I want your tongue in my mouth. Now kiss me."

The kunoichi pulled him into a rather intense kiss. How he had missed that flavor. He drank it in covetously, not particularly caring who might interrupt them at that moment. Hitomi moaned slightly as he nipped at her neck, playing their usual game, all annoyance forgotten.

"Where're your personal chambers?"

"I'm staying with grandpa down in a small place in Hogsmeade. He opened a Japanese robe shop down there. It's only been operational for a few days, but it's doing surprisingly good business. We live in the upstairs floor. Two bedrooms and a kitchen, small bathing room and lounge. It's pretty comfortable, actually."

"No late night meetings, then?"

"It just wouldn't be the same without our futon. Besides, you can slip out of the castle."

"You brought the guest bedroom futon with you?"

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

“Of course I did. It’s ours.”

He just pulled her into another kiss, running his hands along her lithe body. She pulled back and bit down gently in his earlobe, slipping her tongue inside.

“You know, I should be mad at you for not telling me you were coming. I’ll be in your Stealth and Tracking class, just so you’re aware.”

“I know you will be. Lazy Harry, wanting to take a class that you’ve already learned most of the material for. And I did tell you I was coming. Just, this is easier than sneaking in through your dormitory window. Though I still reserve the right to do that if I so choose.”

“Whatever am I going to do with you?”

Hitomi smiled mischievously at Harry.

“Hopefully fuck me out of my gourd several nights a week. You are aware that I’m going to give you a whole slew of detentions this term, right? Better keep your nights free.”

“Sounds fun. You’ll have to hunt me down if I forget.”

“Oh, I will. Well, I have to be at the staff meeting in five minutes. See you tomorrow, my love. Make sure to be late for my class, so I can punish you for it.”

“Will do. Do me a favor, let me know if the old bastard says anything about me?”

“Sure, Harry.”

With one last kiss and a wink, Hitomi departed. Harry decided to head back to the Room of Requirement. He still had a few hours before he was due to meet up with Cho, but he would appreciate a little peace and quiet. The day had already been hectic, and he knew that the morrow would be worse, once news of the battle became public

knowledge. Harry looked down at his masterpiece wand as he left. The moonstone shards illuminated the classroom with a faint glow. A few hours later, at about the same time that Cho strode happily down the corridor to meet Harry in the Room of Requirement, Albus Dumbledore sat alone in his office, hands folded. The day's events had left him with much to ponder. The staff meeting had just terminated a few moments ago. As expected, Severus had repeatedly attempted to press for Harry Potter's immediate expulsion from Hogwarts during the meeting as punishment for his actions. A bit more surprising was the fact that a few of his lesser colleagues had seconded the motion, though none of them had ever actually taught Harry in any fashion. Naturally, Minerva and Rubeus had both immediately leapt to the boy's defense, citing that his actions had saved the lives of countless students, and that he should be lauded as a hero. Severus had countered with the fact that he had also nearly started a riot among the students and had directly defied the Headmaster in the aftermath. The debate was pointless, Albus thought. The thought of pursuing disciplinary action against the boy had long since left his mind.

As for himself, Albus agreed with parts of both arguments, and was unwilling to choose a side, much to the consternation of both. Harry had indeed fought valiantly, and had saved many lives and prevented an absolute catastrophe from taking place. If Tom's forces had successfully assaulted the train and slain the children of the wizarding world, the repercussions would have shaken the very foundations of Hogwarts, and indeed the entire magical community of Britain. Albus would certainly have been out of a job, and public confidence in the school would have been irreparably shattered for generations to come. But still, the ease with which Harry was able to kill, and to callously justify it, saddened Albus to the deepest depths of his soul. With as much power as Harry had exhibited in the battle, he surely could just as easily have held the Death Eaters back with basic spells for long enough for help to arrive. The fact was that he had slaughtered those people needlessly and ruthlessly. Beyond that, as Severus had stated, Harry had nearly incited a riot amongst his student soldiers against the Hogwarts staff in general and Albus in particular after the fight had ended. Worse, he had known exactly what he was doing. Wherever Harry Potter's loyalties were at the moment, they were not entirely with Albus.

That thought led the old man to consider the possibilities of the boy throwing his lot in elsewhere. By far the most horrifying possibility was that he idea that he would go over to Tom. True, Harry had killed many of the Dark Lord's minions today, but the serpentine wizard would dismiss that easily enough. Human lives were of no value to him beyond their usefulness. Tom would surely correctly guess that Harry's use of dark magic had driven a wedge of sorts between him and Albus, and would no doubt make an attempt to capitalize. The Headmaster fully expected Tom to attempt to contact the boy with a recruitment offer within the coming days, knowing the guaranteed effect upon the morale of the rest of the wizarding world should Harry accept. Still, the chances that he would even consider such a proposal were remote. That he would accept was impossible. The boy despised Lord Voldemort and everything that the man stood for, and that much surely hadn't changed in the last few months. Tom and his followers had been directly responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents and godfather, after all.

However, there was another possibility. The Ministry of Magic had surely investigated the scene of the battle by now and reported back to Cornelius Fudge, and many of the students had likely sent owls to their parents detailing the attack, as well as the roles of Harry and his student compatriots in the defense. Several of the children currently attending the school had parents in high positions at the Ministry, and at least a few of them would have immediately contacted Fudge with the news of the battle. The Headmaster had actually been waiting for most of the last few hours for Cornelius to come barging into Hogwarts at the head of a small platoon of aurors demanding the immediate arrest and incarceration of Harry Potter for the use of dark magic. At the very least, he expected the Minister to once again attempt to have him ousted as Headmaster due to his failure in detecting and stopping the attack himself. Albus would have deflected the blustering windbag in either case, but he hadn't heard so much as a peep from the Ministry all evening.

That could mean only one thing. Cornelius was biding his time, waiting to sniff out the wizarding public's attitude concerning the battle and the circumstances of its resolution before taking any action. Albus knew exactly what that reaction would be. His words at the end

of the feast had not been hollow. Harry, despite the unsavory methods he had employed, had acted admirably today. He had responded immediately to the threat, put together a working defense within minutes, and commanded the battle with an efficiency and skill to rival any trained officer. Further, his solitary stand against the final charge was exactly the sort of tale that legends were made of. Once the story of the battle was made public, likely in the morrow's editions of the news parchments, the magical public at large would more or less universally rally around Harry Potter and celebrate the boy and his student soldiers as heroes.

His many shortcomings aside, Albus knew that Cornelius Fudge was a consummate politician. The Minister would be quick to publicly toss his full support behind the boy in an attempt to salvage his own floundering career, and would no doubt attempt to forge a direct alliance pact with the young wizard. That could be very dangerous to Albus's position. Harry's inherent strength and charisma combined with Fudge's political experience and powerful propaganda machine presented a very formidable arrangement. While perhaps advantageous on some level to the light as a whole, such a promise of mutual support would also allow both Harry and Cornelius to become increasingly bold in undermining Dumbledore in the future. Aside from that, Albus just didn't like the idea of potentially being largely left out of the loop. Hopefully, their past antipathy would prevent them from reaching any manner of an accord.

At any rate, Albus knew that in order for him to have any hope of remaining in his position as leader of the light and winning the war against Voldemort, he would need to secure Harry's support for the future. Harry had come into his own, both as a fighter and as a leader, during the battle today. The vast majority of the students were staunchly behind him. Had Harry but given the word earlier, Hogwarts would be in a state of open revolt even as Albus sat in his office now. Perhaps he had intended his entire display as a symbolic gesture, a statement of exactly what he was capable of doing. Albus had always taken Harry's loyalty for granted, but not any longer. Harry was a young wizard of immense power, magically, financially, and politically, and he obviously wasn't going to tolerate being led around like a child for any longer. Through his actions today, Harry had, whether by design or otherwise, overtly placed himself in such a position that the

side that managed to procure his lasting assistance would almost invariably come out the final victors of the war. Dumbledore intended to procure that scramble before any other potential contenders were even able to reach the field. There was only one thing for him to do. On the morrow, Albus would officially induct Harry Potter into the Order of the Phoenix. He still had his misgivings about the boy's direction, but to keep him away from further corruptive forces was the most pressing matter. The rest could be dealt with as circumstances allowed.

Popping a lemon drop into his mouth, Albus looked sadly over to Fawkes, where the resplendent phoenix sat stoically on its perch.

"What has our world come to, old friend?"

Fawkes was unable to reply, save for a soothing trill.

(End Chapter Thirteen)

Author's Note: Well, here's your next installment. I would have gotten this out a bit earlier, but I had to study for a midterm this week. On the subject, expect less frequent updates over the course of the next six weeks or so. I will still try to put out at least one installment per week if at all possible, but I have no less than five extended research papers and a presentation looming on the horizon and final exams on top of that.

The Anthropi Magus spell used in this chapter is borrowed from Damien Darkstar's "Spells & Creatures" compilation.

Not much action here, I know, but I hope that Hitomi fans are satisfied, at least. I originally wanted to do the Cho scene to end the chapter, but I decided instead to leave you all with thoughts of Harry's future alignment fresh in your minds. Regardless of what I choose to do on that front, the next chapter will be devoted mostly to Harry starting to assemble his army within the school and making plans to wreak complete and utter havoc within Hogwarts. Thanks for all the reviews, and keep me posted on your thoughts.

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Interlude One: Sunlight in the Darkness – Within the Room of Requirement

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry lounged about in the Room of Requirement, sprawled out on a large sofa. He still had well over an hour before Cho was due to arrive, and decided to simply relax and enjoy the quiet. His various armaments lay arranged on a small table on the far side of the room, along with his kodachi and black basilisk hide battle robes, leaving a barefooted Harry dressed only in his Muggle shirt and trousers. He used the room's magic to conjure a bottle of heated sake and rested his head against a pillow, rolling the day's events around in his mind.

He had no regrets, but still found it a bit unbelievable that he had actually slain over four dozen Death Eaters. Most of what he had thrown at Dumbledore during his diatribe after the battle had been entirely intended to rile up his makeshift soldiers, but there was still some merit to it. The old man had made a critical blunder today, and had largely lost the confidence of the students. Those students had parents, some of whom exerted a significant degree of influence within the wizarding world. They too would no doubt be extremely critical of Dumbledore and the rest of the Hogwarts staff. Beyond that, Fudge and his merry band of cronies would surely bare their teeth and snarl at the old man in an attempt to win some much-needed favor with the wizarding public. The day's events would have lasting repercussions, for better or worse. At any rate, Voldemort's forces

would be depleted as a result of completely losing six squadrons of Death Eaters, leaving him largely unable to take advantage of any discord that might result from the battle's aftermath. Overall, the current situation was looking pretty good for Harry, who held no regard for any of the three factions.

Removing the band from his hair, Harry then began to consider ways in which to turn the current circumstances further to his advantage. He still intended to forge an elite personal unit of the best, brightest, and most loyal of his newfound student followers. He decided that fifteen or twenty at most would suffice. A larger number would come with a higher risk of the whole operation being exposed, which would be disastrous. Besides, he could always recruit more if needed later on. For now, he would just make to procure what would be his equivalent to Voldemort's Inner Circle. He started to mull over whom exactly to approach, but was taken from his thoughts by a familiar and still completely unwelcome voice sounding inside his head.

"You have done well today, my fallen angel. A worthy first bloodletting for my chosen."

The slight state of good humor in which Harry had previously found himself immediately dissipated. He had enough on his mind without this lingering nuisance disturbing him as well. He purposely added a heavy dose of sarcasm into his response.

"Zharrghast. What has it been now, a month? What can this lowly mortal possibly do for your exalted presence on this dreary evening? Had you called ahead, I would have rolled out the red carpet, as it were."

"Hehehehe...you're developing quite the attitude. I appreciate that. However, I am here only to congratulate you. You have finally started to awaken to your true nature. Soon you will be ready."

"Ready for what, pray tell?"

"Ready to fulfill your true destiny, my fallen angel."

Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he and his symbiotic companion had differing ideas as to what his actual destiny was. Harry believed that his destiny was to slay Voldemort, and then tear down the corrupt Ministry of Magic and do his best to remedy the many iniquities plaguing the wizarding world. Zharrghast, being in many respects the very avatar of destruction, was not likely to have much of an interest in such things. No, he surely had far more sinister designs, and Harry couldn't help but feel that he was being used as a mere pawn in the fallen god's greater scheme. The thought annoyed him no small amount, but there was little he could do about the situation at the moment. If nothing else, he could at least try to find out what Zharrghast was up to.

"And what is my true destiny, then?"

Harry received no answer. The fallen god had retreated to back into the recesses of Harry's soul. The young wizard had a bad feeling about this entire mess. Not for the first time, he wished that he had never approached the sentient brand within the village. In the end, he would just have to wait for Zharrghast to show his hand and then counter the fallen god's machinations to the best of his ability. He wasn't going to be anybody's tool, nor would he become a slave to Zharrghast's power. On a whim, he removed his shirt and looked down at the transparent reflection of the brand emblazoned on his upper body. Dark tendrils of energy emanated from the weapon's blade, spreading out slightly and entangling the previously untouched flesh close to the tattoo. The sentient brand's foothold within Harry's body and soul was increasing, a fact that was beyond any doubt connected with the day's events. Harry found himself at a loss. Further such bloodshed could not be avoided, but he feared the possible consequences. His thoughts continued along the same path until he eventually dozed off into a light slumber.

He awoke some time later, with his head now plopped onto what felt akin to a warm pillow. He felt a soft hand softly threading through his long hair with a slow, rhythmic pace as another tenderly stroked the length of one of his wings. The sensation was nearly euphoric, and Harry would have liked nothing better than to remain in his current state of borderline consciousness for a long while, but his body wouldn't allow it. Eyes opening slowly, he glanced up to find himself nestled in Cho Chang's lap. She had obviously arrived during his brief

nap. He shifted slightly as the rest of his body returned to the waking world, causing the Chinese beauty to look down at him. He glanced up to meet her gaze with a slight smile.

“Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long here. Really, falling asleep like that. I deserve to be put to death...”

“Don’t worry about it, Harry. I can think of worse ways to pass my time. What did you want to talk to me about?”

He answered her with a teasing tone, content with not being forced to think about more serious issues, if only for a short while.

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to be able to enjoy your company?”

She matched his tone with a grin.

“An excuse, you say? Smooth indeed. Shame on you, Harry Potter. Deceiving a poor, innocent girl...”

“But we aren’t exactly innocent anymore, are we?”

Cho’s face fell and tears slowly gathered in her eyes. Harry initially wanted to slap himself for ruining the casual mood, but quickly realized that it was doomed to end sooner or later anyway. He hadn’t asked her here tonight just for a mindless flirting and kissing session, after all. Cho’s voice cracked slightly as she replied.

“No, I suppose we aren’t...”

“Are you holding up okay, Cho? It’s been a rough day for all of us. How are you feeling?”

Cho snorted mirthlessly.

“How do you think I’m feeling? Merlin, Harry...we killed people today. I’m upset and angry about it, obviously. Why did this have to happen to us?”

“Because Voldemort is a monster? Or because Dumbledore is an incompetent old fool, perhaps? I don’t really know why it had to happen, Cho. But it did, and we dealt with it as best as we could. You have a right to be upset and everything, but just don’t turn the blame against yourself. Think of how much worse it would have been had we done nothing.”

Cho closed her eyes for a moment, drying her tears. She changed the direction of the conversation afterwards, regaining some of her better humor. Harry was again amazed with how quickly she was able to shift moods.

“I know. So, what’s with these wings of yours, Harry? They’re not of veela origin. At least, I’ve never heard of any veela having permanent wings. They’re beautiful, in any case.”

“That ties in with the real reason that I asked you here tonight...”

“So, you weren’t just looking for a snog after all? I’m almost disappointed. Well, I’m listening.”

“It’s a pretty long story, so I hope you don’t lose interest easily. Then again, you’re a Ravenclaw. Wordy and boring is just the order of the day for you lot.”

“You’re treading on thin ice, Potter...”

Putting aside his annoyance at being referred to by that surname, Harry decided to end with the sarcastic quips get to the heart of the discussion. He wanted to talk the exotic beauty over to his side. Aside from genuinely fond of the Chinese girl and wanting her with him, her position of authority as Head Girl and her connections within Ravenclaw House would prove extremely useful. She was also a very powerful and intelligent young witch, being the only DA member other than Hermione that had managed to conjure a corporeal Patronus during the previous year. She was the very prototype of what he was looking for in a prospective member of his enforcer group.

“Okay, then. I won’t beat around the bush any longer. I needed to talk to you alone because I need your help.”

She looked somewhat doubtful.

“What could you possibly need my help with? And I still want to hear the story behind those wings.”

Harry sat up from his position in her lap and lazily tossed an arm around her.

“Of course. I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning...”

Harry proceeded to recant to her the events of the first half of his summer, just as he had told Ron a month prior upon returning to Grimmauld Place. He left certain events out of this recitation, however. Particularly, he carefully avoided making any mention whatsoever of Hitomi, to say nothing of their nightly training sessions in the village. Cho possessed a razor sharp mind and was inherently suspicious, and Harry knew that she would have little difficulty making the connection between the kunoichi from his summer and the new teacher from Japan. He also purposely neglected to speak of his arrangement with Draco’s mother. Still, he was able to give Cho an accurate retelling of events. He watched the girl’s eyes as he spoke, seeing surprise and curiosity reflected in her obsidian orbs at some points, but nothing resembling anger or indignation. He ended his story with a detailed account of his brief exchange with Snape right before entering Liangshan Alley. Throughout the tale, Cho listened appreciatively and nodded every few seconds.

“...And that just about does it. You already know what happened at your family’s compound, and talking about my last month with Hermione and the Weasleys would only bore you. Well, there’s also the story of my godfather’s will reading, but I’ll tell you about that some other time.”

Cho cocked her head slightly and regarded him with an inquisitive tone.

“Allow me to make sure that I have all of this correct. You’re apparently descended on your mother’s side from a demonic race of veela, and got those wings as a result of some induced

transformation. You're also the last remaining heir of Lord Grindelwald and officially bear his family's title, along with those of your father and godfather. You've now allied yourself with some of his old adherents, and have chosen to continue his legacy and wipe away the Ministry. And finally, you spent the first month of summer in some secluded village of assassins out in a darkened forest behind Gringotts, where you trained in the Dark Arts, among other things. Is that all of it?"

Harry smiled a bit sheepishly, though it was more for show than anything else. He was a bit concerned that she didn't believe him.

"Yeah, that's about the whole story."

She beamed back at him.

"Well, it's all a bit hard to believe, but I've never known you to tell lies. Besides, a lot of what you're saying does fit in with recorded history. The goblins did indeed openly support Lord Grindelwald. Also, several books written during the time seem to indicate that he dabbled in demonology. But you still haven't told me what you need from me."

"I want you to join me, and to help me accomplish all of this. You're smart and powerful, and beyond that..."

"Go on..."

Harry could tell by the anxious tone of Cho's voice exactly what she wanted to hear. While he did genuinely care for her, it really wasn't in his nature to use sappy language. Still, he resolved to at least make an honest attempt. He only hoped that he wouldn't make a complete embarrassment of himself, and that she wouldn't run off crying afterwards.

"Well, I care about you. I have ever since our Quidditch match during my third year. At first I waited too long to say anything, and then I messed things up between us by being a complete prat. And still, you forgave me. I want to do things right from now on, both for us and for the rest of the wizarding world. Once I've taken the reins of power, I

want you to be right there by my side, Cho. I'll make you a queen, and strive every single day for your happiness. But for now, I need your assistance and support."

The beaming smile never left her face as she cuddled up closer to him.

"Your delivery needs a bit of work, Harry. Still, I can tell that you really meant it, and that's what matters the most. At least some things about you haven't changed over the summer. You're still no good at being romantic. But I can tolerate that, at least as long as you don't think you can use it as an excuse not to even try."

"Don't tempt me. So, you're really in on this?"

Cho nodded.

"Yeah, I am. I completely agree that the Ministry is hopelessly corrupt and needs to be done away with. I want no part of a government run by people like Fudge and Umbridge. As for the Headmaster and his people, they pretty well exhibited their general incompetence today. So, now that we're completely on the same page, might I ask what you're planning to do next?"

Harry stretched his wings slightly, not moving from his seated position, and began threading his hand through Cho's silky raven hair.

"For now, I'm going to wait and watch. I want to see how the aftermath of today's battle plays out with the rest of the wizarding world. I do want to begin putting together a small unit of people within the school, but I'm not yet entirely sure whom I can trust. I've got you, Ron, and Ginny for certain and probably the twins as well. I'd like to say the same for Hermione, but she's been acting a bit off lately, and killing somebody in the fighting today has really messed with her head. Still, there's no rush. I'm going to allow at least a week or so for everybody to get settled into their routines before I make any moves. Maybe Hermione will sort her issues out by then as well."

"I'll start feeling people out within my own house. I imagine there are at least a few that we can count on there. Actually, a lot of people in

Ravenclaw are extremely loyal to you after what you did with the DA last year, especially now that the Ministry's idiocy has been exposed to the entire magical world."

Harry nodded, finally resting his chin on the crown of Cho's head and hugging her tightly against him.

"That's a good idea, but enough with all the planning for now. I'm just too exhausted for it."

"So...I guess you're in no mood for that snogging session, then?"

Harry raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly, sending a silent request to the Room of Requirement. He glanced up at the ceiling, ascertaining that the room's magic had answered him, and then tilted Cho's line of vision up toward the same spot. A sprig of mistletoe hung daintily from a thread, a visible reminder of the last time the two had been alone in the enchanted room.

"Let's hope it goes better this time, okay?"

Cho shook her head in amusement.

"You are absolutely insufferable, reminding me of that bawling excuse for a kiss. Since we've already established that you're now able to talk to me, now you can show me what else you've learned to do with that tongue of yours."

Cho placed her hands on either side of Harry's head and covered his mouth with hers. He returned her kiss readily, and almost immediately felt her tongue probing his lips for entrance. Naturally, he obliged, noting that the inside of her mouth tasted slightly of kiwi. Her flavor was every bit as exotic and bittersweet as the rest of her. Cho's hands moved down from his head as they continued to kiss, now taking the run of his toned upper body at an almost frenzied pace. While impassioned, her efforts were sort of clumsy, indicating to Harry that she really didn't have very much experience with this sort of thing. Cedric Diggory had obviously been her only previous boyfriend, and that relationship had only lasted for about four months

before he was killed on Voldemort's orders after the final leg of the Triwizard Tournament. Still, she was apparently eager to learn.

A bit too eager, Harry thought. She was nearly suffocating by the time she broke off the kiss. He took advantage of the brief pause to unbutton the front of Cho's robes and slide the garment off of her body. She wore a pair of black shorts and a tight blue t-shirt underneath. While she wasn't completely revealed, the view was still by far the best Harry had ever managed to garner of her petite, athletic body. She had a very slightly muscled form accentuated by nearly perfect curves. Her breasts, though not particularly large, were quite well proportioned to the rest of her. Her delicate face with its shining black eyes, framed by her long and soft raven hair, remained her most attractive feature in Harry's opinion. Though not quite as sexy as the likes of a Blaise Zabini, Cho was easily the most beautiful girl that Harry had ever seen. That much had never once changed from the very first time he had laid eyes upon her. He decided to voice his opinion.

"Cho...you are so beautiful..."

She kissed him slightly below the mouth and whispered back breathlessly.

"Compliments will get you nowhere, Harry Potter. You're a wonderful kisser, by the way."

"You're tiring yourself out. Take it a bit slower next time..."

This time, he initiated the kiss. She followed his advice, and their second exchange of passionate feeling lacked the sensation of longing desperation that had filled the last. To Harry, it felt much more sensual, and decidedly nicer. Cho apparently got the hang of things relatively quickly. They continued on like that for well over an hour, neither making any particular move to advance things further. Harry felt obliged to wait for her, judging from the slight reaction on her face when he had removed her robe that she wasn't yet willing to move beyond just kissing. Besides, he could get mere sex from just about anywhere. When finally content to stop, Cho curled back up against him. He wrapped his wings around her body, staring off into

nothingness as she fell asleep. Harry eventually succumbed as well, this time not to wake again until morning.

Despite falling asleep after Cho, Harry managed to awaken first. He felt completely rested, and the lingering pain from the previous day's battle had largely subsided. Harry looked down at Cho as the girl slept peacefully against his bare chest, face largely obscured by a shining waterfall of black hair. He picked up his masterpiece wand from where he had left it, on a small table to his left where it shared space with the now cold sake. The sunstone fragments were glowing, though Harry paid it no mind, waving it lazily and whispering an incantation.

"Tempus."

The visual produced by the spell indicated that it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. The remainder of the school would be assembling for breakfast soon, and Harry needed to hike over to Gryffindor Tower and change into his Hogwarts robes. Loath as he was to rouse the sleeping girl currently clinging to him as if he were a winged teddy bear, there was no help for it. He nudged Cho lightly, getting only an annoyed whimper in response. Sighing, he tickled her face with one of his wings until she sneezed, eyes opening.

"Morning, sleepyhead."

"Harry? What time is it?"

"A few minutes before eight. I'd say we overslept."

Cho jumped from the couch, hastily putting her robes back on and straightening her hair. For his part, Harry languidly strode across the room and gathered up his things, slipping on his shirt and battle robe. The rest he scooped up into his arms. Cho walked over and quickly pulled him into a kiss.

"I'll see you at breakfast. Love you."

Cho bolted from the room, no doubt hoping to be able to take a hot shower before breakfast. Harry's thoughts dissected her last two words for a brief moment. She had likely simply uttered them without

thinking. He couldn't help but wonder if he could honestly say the same two words for her. Dismissing the matter from his mind for the time being, he left the Room of Requirement to begin the long trek to his dormitory. The slightest hint of kiwi lingered on his lips.

(End Interlude One)

Author's Note: Aiya! I really deserve to be taken to task for being so late with this and producing such a short update as well. Most of you will no doubt notice that I haven't listed this as the fourteenth chapter. Really, I don't consider this installment long enough to be worthy of being called a full standing chapter on its own. The whole Room of Requirement scene with Harry and Cho just started to become so long that I wasn't going to be able to fit even half of what I had originally intended into the chapter. Neither did I want to go tossing out a long-winded beast of an update. So, I simply decided to give you the scene on its own as a somewhat brief interlude, allowing me to start the next full chapter with a clean slate. There'll be much more plot development in the next update, I promise.

Of course, I really don't know when that installment will be coming out. I've got a lot on my plate right now, to put things mildly. These research papers are eating my lunch, so much that I'm going to be spending half of my Spring Break in the university library digging for sources and likely the other half doing other schoolwork. As for the wait on this one, my muse suddenly decided to take a sabbatical, and didn't bother returning until earlier this evening.

I may utilize this interlude format again in the future if one particular scene starts to run away on me like this one did. Still, I hope that I've left you gentle readers with enough to chew on while I struggle through my own personal Hell back here. At the very least, I intend to go back through the earlier chapters and make some revisions. I reread the work on this site a few days ago in search of some inspiration, and was appalled with some of the errors that I allowed to stand uncorrected earlier on. I won't be altering the plot any, so there's no reason to reread the story. I just want to fix some grammatical and capitalization mistakes, as well as correct some misused terminology. Any mistakes that have been pointed out in recent reviews will be properly adjusted.

Since this is such a short update, I don't really have any particular question of the week, so I'll leave it to the imagination of my faithful reviewers. I appreciate every one of you. I'll be back here as soon as I'm able.

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Chapter Fourteen: The Term Begins – Fudge for Breakfast

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry made the familiar passage from the Room of Requirement to the entrance of Gryffindor Tower without being detected. It was late enough in the morning that he wouldn’t have been punished for being out of his dormitory, but he had nonetheless taken care to keep himself inconspicuous, not really having the time or inclination to be dragged into a conversation with some random passerby. He cursed to himself as he reached the Fat Lady’s portrait, coming to realize that he didn’t know the password. The sentient painting seemed torn between being amused and scandalized by the action.

“Language, Mister Potter. That is not the correct password.”

Harry rolled his eyes slightly and sighed.

“I don’t imagine that you’ll just let me through? I’ve had a long night...”

“I’m afraid not. You know the rul...”

The portrait swung open, effectively cutting its occupant short. A grinning Neville Longbottom stood in the entranceway.

“Good morning, Harry. We’ve been wondering when you’d show up.”

Harry nodded to the pudgy Gryffindor, who seemed to have gained a bit of confidence since the Department of Mysteries episode.

"Morning, Neville. How was your summer? We haven't had the chance to talk much..."

Neville beamed back at Harry.

"Pretty good. Gran was really proud of me for fighting with you guys at the Ministry. She told me my parents would have been, too. I got a new wand from Ollivander's, teak and unicorn hair. Here, take a look."

Neville handed Harry his new wand, as the latter made a realistic farce of being impressed with it. The crude Ollivander creation didn't so much as hold a candle to Harry's own masterpiece wand, but Neville was proud of it. Harry handed it back to him after a few moments.

"Nice wand, mate. Take good care of it. Let's head upstairs. I need to get dressed for breakfast."

"Sure thing, Harry. Let me warn you, though, it's pretty crowded in our dorm this year."

Harry wondered what Neville meant by that, but didn't bother asking. He would just see for himself when he got there. He slid stealthily up the stairs to the designated sixth year boys' dormitory. Upon arriving at the entrance, he heard angry mutterings, mostly about Dumbledore and the Hogwarts staff. Smirking to himself, he strode in. No less than six locations were occupied, excluding Harry's own bed and bureau. Ron, Seamus, Dean, Neville, and both of the twins. For whatever reason, Fred and George had apparently decided to bunk down with the sixth years instead of staying upstairs with the seventh years. Ron seemed to be egging on the discontent, not that he need have bothered in Harry's estimation. The dakaathi hybrid cleared his throat, drawing attention to his presence and regarding the group with a sly smile.

"Now, I know that you fine gentlemen couldn't possibly be speaking ill of our dear esteemed Headmaster. I'm afraid that I'll just have to report you."

Ron answered his sarcastic demeanor with an amused grin.

“Nah, mate. Wouldn’t think of it. So, where were you all night?”

“Taking the grand tour of the Head Girl’s dormitory, no doubt.”

Harry inclined his head to regard Seamus Finnigan, who had made the latest quip. He briefly recalled the nasty row that he had gone through with his Irish classmate at the beginning of the previous year, pleased that there wasn’t any repeat this time around.

“No such luck, but I did get the abridged version of the Head Girl herself. Tell me, what are Gred and Forge doing down here, anyway?”

The initial retort drew a chorus of laughter and congratulations, as Harry deposited his armaments on his assigned bed and rummaged through his trunk, withdrawing an acromantula silk school robe and a fresh set of Muggle clothes. Ron gave Harry a knowing look, being the only member of the gathering that was aware of the latter’s recent sexual conquests. Well, some of them, at least. The twins feigned hurt expressions.

“Why Harry...”

“...It almost seems as if...”

“...You don’t want us here.”

“We’re very offended.”

They spoke the final line in unison. Harry shrugged his shoulders in response.

“You two know better than that. I just didn’t expect it. Anyway, I’m in the bathroom for a few minutes. I’ll meet you guys downstairs.”

Harry left them and headed into the restroom to freshen up for the day. He ruined another shirt by pushing his wings through the fabric,

and then slipped on his trousers and shoes, followed by his robes. He examined himself in the mirror, concluding that his dakaathi appendages were well enough concealed by his loose robes that nobody would likely notice them. He didn't want to spend his entire day retelling the contrived veela story, after all. As he was about to leave, he turned back and grabbed his kodachi from his bed, girding it to his waist opposite his masterpiece wand. Harry took a moment to polish his emerald snitch necklace, and then sauntered downstairs to go to breakfast.

As per the usual at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, breakfast was a lively affair, featuring a cacophony of loud conversations. Harry took his seat and quickly found himself flanked by Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, much to his annoyance. Not bothering to acknowledge the infatuated glances being sent his way by the majority of the females in the great hall, Harry surveyed the students and staff while absentmindedly eating his morning meal, starting at the Head Table.

He couldn't help but notice that some of the faculty members were sending him disdainful looks every now and then. With a mental sneer, Harry mused that he had not made any allies among the teachers with his antics of the previous day, not that he particularly cared. Snape, of course, spent the entirety of breakfast glaring at Harry. The latter didn't even consider the greasy old bat to be worthy of notice. Another professor, a large, muscled man with Slavic features, seemed less than enamored with the dakaathi hybrid as well. Harry vaguely recalled having seen the man a few times in passing before, indicating that he wasn't a new teacher.

He briefly made eye contact with Hitomi, who was picking at the rich and fattening British morning cuisine on her plate with a plainly disgusted expression. Naturally, she was unused to Western fare, and seemed more than reluctant to get acquainted. Upon noticing Harry, she sent him a smile and a wink, drawing a curious glance from the old man. Harry shook his head slightly, grinning back and nodding to Hagrid, who outright waved to him. He then turned his gaze toward the students, deciding to take the opportunity to make a preliminary sweep for workable candidates for his most recent experiment.

He first looked over his own Gryffindor housemates. Like he had told Cho the previous evening, he knew that he could count fully on the Weasleys to take his side. Aside from being among his closest friends, they all possessed certain traits that would make them extremely valuable. Ron had his tactical abilities and borderline fanatical conviction, along with a burgeoning ruthless streak. Fred and George were probably the most creative and resourceful wizards Harry had ever known, and completely shared his views regarding the Death Eaters and the Ministry of Magic. Ginny possessed a certain mixture of the qualities of her three present brothers, and was probably the most magically powerful of all of the Weasley children, save perhaps Bill. These four would be among the most elite of his group, and would certainly all throw in their full support if asked.

And then there was Hermione. Harry could expound for a good while about all of the positive qualities that his Muggleborn friend potentially brought to the table. Hermione vied somewhat closely with Cho for the position of being the person Harry most wanted in his small unit. Much like the Chinese beauty, Hermione was powerful and intelligent. She also possessed a focused diligence that was hard to find, and that Harry would admit that he himself generally lacked. Still, her inherent aversion to bloodshed and possible lingering respect for the old man and his position of authority were both strikes against her. Her reverence for Dumbledore had no doubt taken a beating after his titanic blunder the previous day, but it remained to be seen if that would be enough to turn her completely against him.

The rest of the Gryffindors were a mixed lot. Of them, Katie Bell was probably the best candidate. She was a moderately strong and talented witch, and had some leadership experience as a school Prefect. Besides, her ties to Harry were stronger than most, having been his Quidditch teammate since his first year at Hogwarts. Neville's loyalty and determination were beyond any reproach. The problem was that he was almost pathetically weak magically and had poor technique to match. Even so, he could be made passable with enough training. Seamus was of slightly below average strength, roughly on par with Ron, but he also lacked the redhead's dedication. Parvati and Lavender were simply too immature, though the former had enough skill that Harry would give her some more thought later. Dean didn't seem to be too interested in the affairs of the wizarding

world beyond what was right in front of him, and Harry imagined that Ginny's current boyfriend would probably prefer to return to the Muggle world after Hogwarts while keeping in touch with his school friends. Harry didn't feel that Dean was the type to approach about a revolution. He didn't know any of the Gryffindors in the year above or below his very well, aside from Ginny and Katie, and would have to ask them about potential candidates there.

There wasn't much potential among the Hufflepuffs, Harry thought as he gave them a glance. Ernie MacMillan, while reasonably intelligent, didn't amount to much in a duel and was a staunch Dumbledore supporter besides. While the pompous Prefect had been the first to openly support Harry during Fudge's pronounced smear campaign of the previous year, it was likely more due to the fact that the old man was also defending him than anything else. Justin Finch-Fletchley had never completely trusted Harry after the whole dueling club episode in their second year, and would certainly not be willing to be a part of what was in stark reality Harry's answer to the Death Eaters. Susan Bones was a possibility, with above average magical power, decent technique and a quick mind. Harry couldn't be sure, though, where she would fall on the whole issue of overthrowing the Ministry of Magic, given her aunt's position at the head of what amounted to the magical government's military police force. Hannah Abbott could also work, being on generally friendly terms with Harry, and at least average in all of the categories he was taking into consideration.

Leaving the Ravenclaws entirely up to Cho's discretion, Harry slid his eyes over towards the Slytherin Table, responding to the dirty looks sent his way with a sneer. The vast majority of the serpent's den supported Voldemort and despised Harry. That dislike had no doubt turned to absolute hatred after the previous day's events. He actually found himself hoping that they'd be stupid enough to try to ambush him in the halls. Naturally, aside from his three recent acquaintances there, he expected to find no candidates whatsoever in Slytherin. He had decided early on to include Blaise and her friends, and he already had a special request in mind for them. Maybe a few requests, he thought with a mental smirk. He found them chatting at a far corner of the table, making no effort to socialize with their housemates. Daphne sent Harry a small smile upon noticing his gaze, but the other two had their backs to him.

The arrival of the morning post rather loudly interrupted his scan. He hardly needed to be told what would be in the headlines of the day's issue of the Daily Prophet. Harry glanced over at Lavender's copy to see what Fudge's mouthpiece had to say about the battle and its aftermath.

You-Know-Who Attacks the Hogwarts Express!
Death Eaters Annihilated by Student Defenders!

Raquel Dunsford, Special Correspondent

Yesterday, at roughly three o'clock in the afternoon, You-Know-Who's followers attacked the Hogwarts Express, the train ferrying our young sons and daughters to school. According to the Prophet's information, the assault was spearheaded by two aerial squadrons, supported by a main force of four squadrons led by one of You-Know-Who's most feared lieutenants, Azkaban escapee Bellatrix Lestrange.

Fortunately, the senior members of the student body were quick to respond to the threat. In the noteworthy absence of the Hogwarts faculty, the wizards and witches charged with teaching and protecting our children, a group of approximately one hundred young men and women, led by Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, assembled to defend the train the lives of their younger schoolmates.

The result was a crushing defeat for the forces of darkness. The students held off the aerial squadrons at both ends of the train and felled a third of their number, while Potter braved the final charge of the supporting unit alone and dueled with Lestrange, slaying nearly fifty dark wizards and witches in protection of his friends and classmates.

An official Ministry of Magic investigative report indicates that several of the enemy combatants were slain through the use of spells ranked in the Forbidden Class, dark curses normally punishable by a life sentence in Azkaban when used upon another human being. Apparently, Potter saw fit to serve You-Know-Who's hordes with a dose of their own foul medicine. In the opinion of this reporter, it's about damned time.

Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic, agrees. In the immediate aftermath of this base and cowardly attempt upon the lives of our children, Minister Fudge immediately convened the Wizengamot for a special emergency session. The very first item on the legislature's agenda was the official announcement of an executive decree fully pardoning Harry Potter and his fellow students for any and all illegalities committed in the duration of the defensive effort. He then proceeded to sponsor a series of sweeping acts designed to help ensure the future safety of our society and prosecute the war effort against the forces of darkness, all of which met with nearly unanimous support within the Wizengamot. For full details of these new laws and programs, see the enclosed article.

Minister Fudge has also issued a statement publicly with the support of the Wizengamot condemning Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, for his "dismal and alarming failure to recognize and respond to this threat, placing the lives of our children in mortal peril." The Minister further lambastes Dumbledore for "forcing several young men and women to witness and experience a scene that would chill the hearts of even the most hardened of the Ministry's Aurors." Minister Fudge questions whether or not the wizard responsible for the defeat of Lord Grindelwald half a century ago remains competent to oversee the safety and education of the wizarding world's children. The Minister has announced that he will personally head an appointed task force charged with inspecting the defensive measures in place at the school and making changes as needed to guarantee the safety of the students, so that there will not be any repeat whatsoever of this horrific incident that claimed the lives of three Hogwarts students.

As for Potter and his student soldiers, Minister Fudge has been loud in his praise of their efforts, citing them as "heroes, one and all, without whom the lives of our beloved children would have been lost forever." He has also pledged to pursue the Order of Merlin for every student that participated in the defense, and to push for First Class honors for Harry Potter himself, for this effort as well as for his countless other sacrifices and accomplishments in thwarting You-Know-Who's plans over the course of the last five years.

Harry finished reading over the front-page article with a slight chuckle. As expected, Fudge had wasted no time in jumping all over

Dumbledore's case. He imagined that the blustering Minister was about as happy as a clam at high tide right now, finally having something tangible to lord over the old man. While the Order of Merlin and particularly the executive pardon were nice gestures, Harry knew that Fudge was only loading onto his bandwagon now in an attempt to salvage his career. Still, if this was meant as the beginning of an offer for an alliance of some sort, it was actually worth considering. Having the Minister for Magic on his side would make it much easier for Harry to circumvent the old man in the future if needed, and Fudge likely wouldn't attempt to restrict Harry in any way, only wanting his support to get back in the public's good graces. He would gladly enough provide that in exchange for the Ministry of Magic's protection, at least for the time being. Once Voldemort and the old man were out of that way, there would be nobody left to stop Harry, leaving him free to betray the Ministry at will and take over. Besides, Harry being on good terms with Fudge would chafe the Hell out of Dumbledore.

Harry surveyed the Great Hall, taking in the reactions of the faculty and students to the article. Naturally, Dumbledore and his chief loyalists at the Head Table looked annoyed and disgruntled, probably about the public condemnation, though Harry figured that Snape was more pissed about him getting pardoned than anything else. Hitomi seemed to be trying her hardest not to laugh at them, and was only succeeding through the merits of her extensive training in repressing her emotional reactions. The Slytherins mostly looked torn between indignation and terror, though Harry couldn't quite figure out the reason for the latter. Ron addressed him presently.

"Hey, what do you make of this, mate?"

Harry stretched his neck and popped a lingering crick before answering.

"I figure Fudge is kissing our arses to try and bail some water out of his sinking ship. He's got the old man right pissed, at any rate."

Ron glanced over at the Head Table and sneered.

"Serves him right. Take a look at those new laws?"

“No, toss me a copy of the paper.”

Ron nabbed Seamus's copy of the Daily Prophet and tossed it to Harry, the Irish boy absorbed in a conversation with Dean, Hermione, and Ginny. Harry thumbed through to the indicated article, surprised by what he saw. The first of the new acts, dubbed the “Potter Act” in apparent honor to the circumstances of his stand at the train, granted the Aurors full authorization to use the Dark Arts, including the Unforgivables, to subdue enemy combatants, particularly the Death Eaters. A second made provisions to allow students that scored high enough on their OWL's to elect to circumvent their final two years at Hogwarts and enter straight into the Auror training program, beginning with the next academic year. Harry couldn't help but look at Malfoy with a broad smirk as he read the third of Fudge's new legislative decrees, which authorized the Ministry to petition Gringotts Wizard Bank to be allowed to seize all holdings and assets of known Death Eaters to add to the government's coffers. There were a few other stipulations of lesser importance that Harry only skimmed over.

He was a bit impressed. Apparently, Fudge was actually capable of doing something right without the corruptive influences of Dolores Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy directing all of his policy initiatives. Most of the students were conversing in hushed tones by this point, having finished reading the newspaper and eating. The staff rose from their position to hand out course schedules. McGonagall sent Harry a thin smile upon handing him his timetable.

“Potter, the Headmaster has requested me to remind you that he is expecting you in his office this afternoon. You are to report there immediately following your Magical Stealth and Tracking Class.”

Harry was obviously less than excited about the prospect of meeting with the old man again. He didn't know for sure what Dumbledore wanted, but he imagined that he'd be getting a private lecture on the evils of the methods he had applied during the battle. At least Fudge's pardon gave Harry some additional ammunition to fire back at the old man. He looked up at his Head of House.

“I understand, Professor. I'll be there.”

The stern woman nodded and moved to continue with her task, but turned back after a few steps.

“Oh, and Potter? Please allow me to thank you. Regardless of the Headmaster’s personal scruples, there can be no denying that both your actions and those of your friends yesterday have saved this school.”

Harry nodded, suddenly remembering a question that he needed to ask.

“Thank you, ma’am. Oh, by the way, would you happen to know where my Firebolt’s being held? I really should pick it up before tryouts start.”

“I have it in my office. You may come and retrieve it at any time.”

“I’ll come by sometime in the next few days, then.”

McGonagall returned to handing out timetables without a word. Harry looked at his own, noting that he had a relatively lax schedule that day. He had his class with Hitomi, which was certain to be an adventure, at one-thirty in the afternoon. He was free until then, and decided that he would first take a trip over to the Owlery and send that letter to Cho’s uncle, and then find some way to fritter away the few hours before class. He inclined his head towards Ron, hoping that he’d be free during the time.

“You got anything today, mate?”

“Yeah, I’ve got my Wizarding Chess and Gaming class in a few minutes. I’m free for the rest of the day after that. And you?”

Harry found it amusing that Hogwarts actually taught a class on chess. After five long years at the school, it seemed as if Ron would finally top a subject.

“Magical Stealth and Tracking this afternoon, then I get to go and listen to the old man pontificate about something or the other. They actually have a class on chess here?”

Ron nodded conspiratorially, glancing over at Hermione before leaning in closer to Harry and speaking in a hushed tone of voice.

“Sure do. That and some other games like Indoor Quidditch and stuff. Easiest pass I’ll ever get, mate. You should’ve signed up.”

Hermione scowled at Ron from across the table, interjecting into the conversation. He apparently hadn’t been quiet enough.

“Are you ever going to start putting some effort into your studies, Ron? Your NEWT’s determine your career placement. You shouldn’t be taking classes because they’re easy, honestly...”

Ron grinned sheepishly and loaded another plate of food, causing Hermione to turn away with a sniff. Harry decided to bail his friend out by altering the subject somewhat, pleased to see that Hermione was acting like her old self. Perhaps getting back into the familiar Hogwarts environment was doing her some good.

“How about you, Hermione? Are you free this morning?”

A head of bushy hair shook in the negative.

“No, sorry. I have Potions and then Ancient Runes today. My schedule is pretty much booked solid during the entire school week.”

“Study too hard and you’ll get premature wrinkles, you know. Well, I suppose I might as well be headed over to the Owlery now, seeing as you both have class. Later.”

Harry stood up and left the Great Hall, hearing more than a few hisses as he walked past the Slytherin Table. He was on the point of stopping and saying something to really rouse their ire, but reconsidered. Dumbledore, who Harry would have to deal with later that day, had already been cross with him once over his taunting Malfoy, and he would have better opportunities later to bait the

serpents besides. He just flipped his hair and laughed scornfully while leaving.

He hadn't walked more than a few dozen steps in the outside corridor when a familiar weight attached itself to his arm. He glanced over to see Cho walking in stride with him and spoke in an amused tone.

"Just can't get enough of me, can you?"

She looked up into his eyes.

"And just where are you going, all alone on this chilly September morning?"

"Oh, nowhere special. I have a scheduled rendezvous with my secret girlfriend in Hogsmeade."

"Is that so? Well, in that case, you're headed entirely in the wrong direction."

"Plenty of hidden passages leading out of the castle, you know. Can't let the old man catch me leaving the grounds."

Cho raised her eyebrows mockingly.

"Maybe I'll just have to go with you, then, and let her know that her beau is now taken."

"Might as well make a day of it, then. I hear they've got some cozy rooms upstairs in The Three Broomsticks."

"You know I'd love to, but I've got Arithmancy in twenty minutes. You just happened to be heading in the general direction of the classroom."

Harry nodded.

"I'd walk you the entire way, but I have no idea how to get there."

"We've got a few minutes still. So, where are you really going?"

“Just up to the Owlery. I owe your uncle a nice, long letter of appreciation. That armor of his saved my arse yesterday on several occasions.”

“He’ll appreciate it more if you describe what happened. He loves hearing stories about his work in action. They mean so much more to him than compliments on the aesthetics. Speaking of which, I never got to take a good look at yours. Can I see it later?”

“I’ll have to wear it down tomorrow, then. What’s the general sentiment in your house a morning after?”

“Disillusioned and angry, pretty much like the rest of the school. I think there are quite a few people that’ll help us out, though. Like I said last night, you’re pretty popular in Ravenclaw. I observed the lot of them at breakfast, and I’ve got a few in mind to approach strai...oh bugger, this is where I turn off. We’ll talk more later, okay?”

“Right, I’ll be around. Have fun with your numbers, Cho.”

Cho gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and slipped off his arm before heading down an adjacent corridor. He kept on his current path for a ways further, finally heading up a few flights of stairs into the school Owlery. He took a seat at a small desk near the door, away from the main owl lofts, and grabbed a quill and parchment from his bag. Harry followed Cho’s advice and wrote a long letter to her uncle, first complimenting him on the workmanship of the armaments, and then detailing how they had saved his life in the battle. To be completely honest, Harry doubted that he would have been killed in any case, as that contemptible Prophecy stated that his end could only come at the hands of Voldemort himself. He also had nothing solid to indicate that his breastplate protected him from Bellatrix’s lethal curse at all. It very well could have been entirely his own body that had absorbed the curse. At any rate, the armaments had proven exceedingly useful in deflecting the minor Death Eater curses, allowing Harry to focus almost entirely on offense and take them out quickly. He probably wouldn’t have had the energy left to overcome their psychotic commander if not for that fact. Once satisfied with his composition, he strolled into the center of the room, holding out his arm for Hedwig.

The temperamental snowy owl came without needing to be called, daintily extending a talon to accept his letter, which he duly attached.

“Take that to Ts’ao Chang, okay?”

The bird flew off with a hoot. Harry watched her disappear into the morning sky, turning to leave the Owlery when she was out of sight. Left with nothing at all to do, Harry started back for Gryffindor Tower, hoping to find some means of amusing himself until his afternoon class.

A few hours’ passage found him lazily sprawled out onto a leather armchair in the Common Room, but only after somebody had to come out and give him the password. He had neglected to ask Neville earlier, and the terminally forgetful boy naturally didn’t think to volunteer the information of his own volition, if he had even remembered it then. Harry had spent most of the meantime making small talk with whoever happened to be passing through. None of those conversations had lasted more than a few minutes, and he was currently staring at the ceiling while fingering the handle of his kodachi. Harry languidly glanced over to the portrait hole as it slid open, admitting a new arrival into the room. It was Katie Bell, who strode immediately over to Harry’s position as if looking for him. He kept his eyes on her as she approached.

“There you are, Harry. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Harry shifted positions in his armchair, now sitting upright rather than being sprawled out.

“And you didn’t think to look in our Common Room first?”

Katie flushed slightly, but grinned nonetheless.

“Quiet, you. I thought you’d be out on the grounds somewhere with Granger or Ron. Anyway, do you have a few minutes?”

Harry smirked up at his longtime teammate. The thought occurred to him that although he and Katie had known one another for over five years, they had never had a single lasting conversation.

"I have all the time in the world for you, sweetheart."

Katie shook her head in response, despite blushing a little deeper.

"Spare me the act, Casanova. I need to talk to you about Quidditch."

Harry had pretty much known from the beginning what she wanted, and wasn't very interested in discussing the subject. He had much more important things to worry about, but he really had nothing better to do at this particular moment. He might as well get it out of the way.

"I'm just the Seeker. I go out and catch the Snitch. I don't know the first thing about tactics or any of that rot. If you need help managing the team, you should probably ask the twins, or barring them, Ron."

Katie nodded.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about, though. Ginny Weasley is a decent enough Seeker, not anywhere near as good as you, mind, but our Chaser line is completely shot now that Angie and 'Licia are both graduated. So, I want to know if you'd have any objection to switching positions this year. You've been with the team long enough that you'd have a much easier time adapting than a new recruit."

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm willing, but why not consider switching Ginny over if I'm the better Seeker?"

"She had a good eye, but isn't all that great of a flyer. She'd make a mediocre Chaser at the very best. Besides, I don't think she has the mindset for it. Ginny's at her best when left to her own devices, not as part of any cohesive unit. Your talent is more or less wasted with the level of competition around here anyway. Hufflepuff's replacement for Diggory graduated last year and Malfoy couldn't catch a Snitch if you literally handed it to him. Chang is the only one that even comes within earshot to being a match for you, and she can only do so much on that crappy old broom of hers. With the twins keeping the pressure on her, I'm sure Ginny can beat her out again this year."

“Well, you’ve obviously thought this out. I’ll switch over. I take it we’re going to have to hold a tryout for the last Chaser spot?”

“I’ll schedule something for next week. I want to have a full team meeting Wednesday night. Seven o’clock sharp down here.”

“I’ll be there, oh Captain of mine.”

“Right, I also want to put you through some Chaser drills before tryouts. Just to get you acclimated. Meet me at the pitch at six o’clock tomorrow morning. We’ll see how much work you need from there.”

“A little one-on-one, Katie? I guess I need to go get my Firebolt, then.”

“Where is it?”

“Up in McGonagall’s office. I was going to pick it up sometime tomorrow.”

“I have Transfiguration this afternoon. I’ll get it from her while I’m there.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“No problem. See you on the pitch.”

Katie turned and headed upstairs into the Gryffindor girls’ dormitories. Harry watched her walk up the steps, mostly training his eyes on the lower half of her body. Even during the deepest points of his standing infatuation with Cho during the last few years, he had experienced more than a couple of nighttime fantasies involving his female teammates and the showers in the locker room. The whole idea of a Quidditch orgy held far less appeal now that Angelina and Alicia were gone, but Katie was still nice to look at. Harry had no serious intentions of trying to pursue anything with her, of course. His female situation was complicated enough as it was.

All perversion aside, Harry was grateful that this arrangement had presented itself. He did want to get Katie signed on to his growing

band of supporters, and this ready made avenue through which to be able to get to know her better would be very helpful in bringing it about. At the very least, he would have an opportunity to sound her out. But that was tomorrow, and he had a class in a few minutes. He could only hope that this latest round of lessons with the kunoichi would be as fulfilling as the first.

Further analysis of his course timetable revealed that Hitomi's classroom was outside, on the grounds near the Whomping Willow. It was a rather convenient location for Harry, who imagined that he'd be headed straight over to Hogsmeade after the class on more than a few occasions. She'd be more than willing to give him a refresher of their previous lessons, no doubt, and he intended to take full advantage of the fact.

The early morning chill lingered on the grounds as Harry trudged along in the direction of the indicated location. The Acromantula silk of which his school robes were composed was a naturally thin material, leaving him rather unprotected from the cold. Still, he wasn't all that uncomfortable. Reaching the Whomping Willow, Harry saw that the school had constructed a small facility quite similar to the training grounds at the outskirts of the village. The Japanese architecture was a striking contrast to the European medieval look of the rest of the school.

Glancing back over toward the Whomping Willow, Harry wondered if Hitomi knew about the passageway leading from there into the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. A quick sweep of the training grounds revealed that she was nowhere around, unless she was purposely hiding from him. He saw his two tiger guardians bounding towards him from a clearing in the distance. Thankful for the momentary distraction, he scratched the two large felines behind the ears for a few minutes.

"Are you two liking the grounds here?"

He received a pair of nearly imperceptible nods in response. Soon enough, other students started filing into the training grounds for the class, and Harry sent his pets back out onto the grounds. Few enough students registered for the course that all four houses were being taught together, rather than the usual two-house format. Harry

figured that this was probably the case in most of the elective upper year courses, though.

Neville and Seamus had both elected to take the course, constituting the Gryffindor contingent, and took a seat on the soft grass to either side of Harry. Susan Bones was the only Hufflepuff in the class, joined by Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw. Tracey Davis was also enrolled, along with Theodore Nott, who stayed as far away from the others as possible, not daring to do anything more than silently glare at Harry. He couldn't resist the urge to bait the lone Death Eater hopeful.

"What's the matter, Nott? Do I frighten you? You and your little buddies were more than content to snarl and hiss at me at breakfast. Whatever would your father say?"

"Yes, go ahead run your mouth, Potter. We'll be the ones having the last laugh, when you're groveling for mercy at the Dark Lord's feet. I hope he kills you slowly."

"My, you sound ever so much like Malfoy. Do you lot have some sort of conditioning program? At any rate, I'm hardly afraid of Voldemort. Look around you, Theodore. The tide's turning against you. Public morale is at a peak, a third or more of the entire Death Eater ranks are dead, and Fudge has seemingly gotten his head out of his arse at long last. The war will be over within a year."

Harry had guessed on that first point, but figured that it was reasonably accurate. The wizarding public tended to rally around whatever the Daily Prophet printed, and the unofficial Ministry mouthpiece was certainly keeping a positive beat at the present. From the corner of his eye, Harry could see a figure approaching through the passageway behind the Whomping Willow. He ruffled the smaller Nott's hair mockingly and before walking back to where Neville and Seamus were sitting, both Gryffindors shaking with silent laughter at seeing one of Draco's little toadies getting pushed around. Tracey was glaring disdainfully at Nott, showing her own dislike for the boy.

Harry kept quiet during the class for the most part, only making a few whispered comments to some of the other students from time to time. Hitomi had indeed known about the secret passageway, and had entered through it. She looked a bit different in the sunlight, not quite as pale. Aside from casting him a few surreptitious glances during the lesson, she did nothing to let onto the fact that they knew one another. She had mostly set them to learning to relax their minds into a meditative state, stressing that it was necessary to be able to recognize one's own magical aura before it was possible to learn to repress it. With a properly heightened sense of awareness, one could then focus their senses to be able to visualize the latent magical potential within a certain range. It was actually much like Moody's magical eye, which was able to "see" magic, regardless of the presence of physical obstacles.

Hitomi had again glanced over at Harry while explaining that part, as he was as much a novice on the subject of tracking as everybody else in the class, almost as if willing him to grasp the underlying message. He did so without much difficulty. If he learned to completely repress his magical aura, then he could render Moody's magical eye functionally useless. He was already adept enough in the stealth aspect to fool most means of detection, human or otherwise, but the grizzled ex-Auror was nearly in a league of his own.

Most of the male students in the class had significant difficulty relaxing in the presence of the attractive professor. Seamus was openly ogling at some points, and none could resist the urge to look altogether. Of course, Harry had seen her completely naked already, and had indeed been physically intimate with her as well on multiple occasions, and so had no reason to stare now. The lesson finally ended as the sun started to set, as most students had at least managed to procure a slight level of magical awareness. Harry had likely topped the class, but couldn't be sure. Hitomi seemed to be watching him as the other students left, silently asking him to remain. He did so, following her into the passageway, far enough to be out of the range of normal sight. There was still enough light that she was barely visible, as she turned to regard him with her mercurial smile.

"You were supposed to be late, Harry. How am I supposed to give you detention when you don't break any rules?"

Harry sighed.

“The old man wants me up in his office. I don’t know what he wants or how long he’s going to keep me. I’ll make a trip down to Hogsmeade sometime this week.”

“Grandpa wanted me to tell you that he’s dying to hear the story of that battle.”

“I’ll be sure to...”

Harry was interrupted by a loud squawking sound. He and Hitomi turned simultaneously in the direction of Hogwarts, from where the noise had come. A large bird glided through the passageway, nearly impossible to see due to the receding sunlight. It was a raven. The bird glared at Harry, a fact that combined with its somewhat skeletal appearance to give the impression of a bona fide messenger of death. Without invitation, it perched itself imperiously on Hitomi’s shoulder, digging its talons into her flesh and drawing blood. That proved to be a fatal mistake, as the kunoichi drew a curved dagger from her waist in irritation and skewered the hapless avian clean through the throat. An envelope fell from the raven’s right leg as it slumped over lifelessly and tumbled unceremoniously to the earth below. Harry took the letter, arching an eyebrow as he examined it.

The letter was sealed with the Dark Mark.

(End Chapter Fourteen)

Author’s Note: I did give fair warning that the next update would be a while in coming. This chapter didn’t do much in terms of overall plot development, but I needed to get the school term started up. The next few chapters will probably be similarly slow in pacing, as I get all of the stuff currently standing out there resolved to an extent. Expect the next update to take as long as this one did, as I’m still wading through all of these research papers.

I’m somewhat undecided as to exactly how to handle this letter from Voldemort as far as Harry telling the old man is concerned. I know

how the issue as a whole will be resolved in the end, but I'm not sure whether or not to have Harry share the information with Dumbledore and work out a cooperative plan of action, or to just attempt to handle it on his own. Let me know what you all think.

Thanks for all of the reviews. I was admittedly a bit surprised to break the fifty mark with that last short interlude, but I'm appreciative for it. Let me assuage one general fear. I will not be abandoning my multiple sex partner strategy and turning this into a monogamous Harry/Cho story. I stopped wavering on what I wanted to do with pairings a long time ago.

I just noticed this morning that the site has finally added a category for Blaise in the pairing filter. About damned time, I say. Still, who would have ever thought that a largely throwaway character would become such an entity within the fandom?

Hope you all enjoy the chapter, and please keep reviewing. Later.

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Chapter Fifteen: The Lions, the Witch, and the Bowler Hat – Pain and Pleasure

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Eyebrow still raised, Harry glanced down at the dead raven on the ground and then over at Hitomi. She followed his gaze downward, and sheathed her dagger with a smirk.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side. And I thought you got off on pain?”

She sidled up against Harry, pinning him gently against the passage wall behind her and resting her head against the side of his neck. He placed his free arm around the kunoichi's waist, forest green eyes torn between focusing on the beautiful woman pressing rather provocatively against his body or the ominous black envelope resting in his hand. While glancing at the latter, Harry felt Hitomi's lips against his ear. Her moist breath seemed to fill his entire head as she spoke in hot whisper.

“Not when it comes from filthy creatures like that. Only you can make it pleasurable...”

As if to emphasize the last part, she began to sensually grind her firm, tight rear against his crotch. The skin-tight black training suit she wore was almost impossibly thin, so it felt as if she were completely naked. The gyrating motion immediately brought Harry to full attention. The dakaathi hybrid closed his eyes and sighed as his companion started to snog his inner ear. Despite being halfway to losing it already, Harry managed to respond.

"I don't recall you exhibiting this particular technique over the summer. I feel decidedly shortchanged now."

"Trust me, I haven't even taught you the half of what I know. I wouldn't want you to get bored of me too quickly."

He tensed up as she slowly rubbed across his full length. The envelope fluttered out of Harry's hand onto the ground, completely forgotten for the moment. He laughed slightly, speaking with as much humor inflected into his voice as his current level of control over his senses would allow for.

"I hope you'll forgive me if I don't commit the specifics to memory. At least, I'd certainly hope that I never wind up in the position where I have to rub some bloke off with my arse."

She momentarily halted her actions at that, much to Harry's annoyance, and giggled into his ear.

"You shouldn't, as long as you don't somehow get yourself stuck in detention with Professor Snape. From what I could see at last night's staff meeting, that man has got some sort of obsession with you."

Harry refused to even respond to her gibe about the greasy git. Back in control of his faculties, he ventured a glance at Hitomi's shoulder, where a small stream of blood was slowly trailing down onto her breast, the result of the raven's harsh landing. Leaning over the pale beauty's shoulder, he lapped up the better part of the mess with his tongue, eliciting a sharp moan from her.

"So, what exactly went down at that meeting, anyway?"

Hitomi answered with difficulty, panting slightly as he slowly ran his mouth over the spot where the bird's talons had pierced her skin.

"Snape tried to persuade Dumbledore to expel you on four or five occasions. A few of the professors backed him up, but nobody of any real consequence on the faculty. McGonagall and Hagrid immediately backed you up every time Snape opened his mouth. Other than that, nothing of any concern to us..."

Harry nodded against her shoulder, casually rubbing her stomach with one hand and holding her against him with the other.

"The old man won't dare try anything against me openly. His public image is already on the brink of collapse after the assault on the train. Fudge would just love to be handed a golden opportunity to drive the final nail into his coffin."

Hitomi only hummed contentedly in response. He knew that she really had no interest whatsoever in the interplay of wizard politics. She had only initially signed into his camp due to her obligations to her grandfather and her clan as a whole. Now she seemed to have a more personal attachment to him. Either way, she didn't care much at all for the future of the wizarding world. He just pulled her in a little tighter.

"If you don't like listening to my scheming, I can always just go and have my meeting with the old man. As it stands now, I'll be lucky to get away from him and still have time for supper."

"How can you eat that garbage, anyway? I could barely hold down breakfast this morning."

"You might be surprised to hear that the Hogwarts cuisine is far better than most of what you'd get on the outside. You ought to try Hagrid's cooking sometime. I still stand by the theory that it has potential military applications."

“He tried to offer me some rock cakes when I passed by his hut the other day. Quite proudly said that they were your personal favorite, actually. I wasn’t quite daring enough to accept one.”

“I do prefer you with your teeth intact. Honestly, I’ve never had the heart to tell him just how awful his concoctions are.”

“I’m not sure if I could either. He’s just the sort of person that you can’t bring yourself to be rude to, and I’ve only spoken to him in passing once.”

Harry took a moment to give the half-giant some thought. It was really unfortunate that the man was so loyal to Dumbledore. Harry really didn’t want to have to hurt the man who was essentially the first friend he had ever known. Hagrid had essentially rescued him from his old life with the Dursleys, and Harry had never forgotten it. Still, there was little he could do aside from trying to keep an eye out for the man.

“Anyway, I imagine I should be headed off to see the old man now. Though I must admit, the idea of keeping him waiting into the night is tempting.”

Hitomi pouted.

“Can’t I just drag you back to my house instead?”

Harry smiled sardonically.

“Not tonight, love. If I don’t stay up in the dorms once in a while, my mates are liable to think I’m avoiding them. And I’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”

“Suit yourself, if you’d rather sleep in a crowded room with a bunch of boys instead of with me.”

“You make it sound so personal.”

“I’m just kidding. But remember, you promised to come down to Hogsmeade this week.”

“I know, I won’t forget. Now, think you can perhaps let me out?”

Harry was still rather comfortably trapped against the wall of the passageway. The kunoichi made a show of moving forward to allow him to leave, but then stopped and ground herself against his lower regions one last time. It had the effect of bringing his previously diminishing erection back to full alertness. She arched her body and created just enough open space to allow him to slip out from behind her. Her eyes shined with amusement despite the rapidly diminishing light as she glanced from Harry’s crotch to his face.

“That’s for not showing up late for class like I asked. Have fun with the old man.”

“Very funny. I’ll get you back for this, you know.”

Hitomi only flashed her trademark smile. Harry started to leave, grumbling to himself about the fact that for the second time in as many days that he was left hanging with a full hard-on. And this time, he didn’t have a few dozen Death Eaters to work out his frustration upon. The sound of his companion’s voice caused him to turn back in her direction.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Harry?”

She tossed him the sealed letter, which he had very nearly made a rather sizable mistake by leaving behind. Harry imagined that it only contained a retinue of threats against his own life and those of his friends, and promises of vengeance for the previous day’s humiliating defeat. Despite that, it just wouldn’t do to have some random passerby pick up a letter addressed to him from the Dark Lord.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. See you later.”

With a smile and a wink, she disappeared into the darkened passageway, heading back to her house in Hogsmeade. Harry dropped the envelope into his bag and started off in the opposite

direction, hoping to get back to the castle before the sun completely set.

He arrived at the Headmaster's office about half an hour later, after having deliberately taken his time in traversing the corridors of Hogwarts. The entirety of the student body was at dinner, and thus the hallways were completely deserted. Harry absentmindedly hoped that the old man was off feasting in the Great Hall as well, which would give the young wizard a reasonable excuse for skipping out on this little conversation. Luck was not on his side, however. The gargoyle sprang aside without the need for a password, as if expecting him. The old man sat at his desk, eyes twinkling with amusement and Harry plopped emotionlessly into an armchair across from him.

"Ah, Harry. You seem to be a bit subdued this evening."

"My apologies, sir. I'm sort of tired. The class I just left was rather exhausting."

The look that crossed Dumbledore's face for a brief moment betrayed the fact that he didn't believe a word of Harry's excuse. Which was fine, given that hadn't really intended to fool the old man to begin with, just that it would have been imprudent to openly tell him that he had no desire to talk to him. The blatant lie got the point across every bit as effectively. Dumbledore only smiled serenely in response.

"I might imagine so. NEWT-level courses are indeed much more taxing, as I am sure that you will continue to find. Now, I have asked you here this evening because I have some serious concerns about you, Harry."

Harry failed keep the sarcasm out of his retort.

"You don't say."

Dumbledore sighed audibly, an austere and somewhat regretful expression on his wizened features.

"This is not a matter to be regarded lightly. I find your recent tendency to employ the Dark Arts to be entirely unacceptable. You are treading

down the wrong path, Harry. I am beginning to see far too many similarities between yourself and the young Tom Riddle these later days, only you seem to have already delved much deeper into the arcane than he had while in Hogwarts.”

Harry realized that there was no point in trying to completely deflect the old man’s suspicions and pretending to be a good little boy. Dumbledore had already made his own conclusions regarding the situation, and had hard evidence from the previous day’s events to back them up. Besides, Harry now had enough cards assembled his own hand that he didn’t necessarily need to back down from the aged wizard. He didn’t like being compared to Voldemort a single bit. Mostly because the remark hit a bit too close to the actual state of things, aside from Harry not being a crazed terrorist or a pureblooded supremacist.

“Of course you’re correct, sir. I shall abandon my Dark Arts studies at once. They’re hardly necessary, right? Voldemort will assuredly fall before the onslaught of my Jelly-Legs Jinx. Or maybe I simply can levitate him until he burns up in the atmosphere. Perhaps a well-placed Cheering Charm might do the trick.”

“Do not take that tone with me...”

As rather forcefully requested, Harry dropped the sheer mocking from his voice.

“Fine, but am I getting the point across? We’re at war, professor. It doesn’t make me the next Dark Lord because I’m willing to fight the enemy on equal terms. Are you afraid of compromising some supposed moral high ground here? Look in the papers. The people are sick of these attacks. They want Voldemort and his minions dead before any more innocent lives are lost. Even that idiot Fudge has managed to get the picture.”

“I do not now and will not ever condone the taking of lives beyond absolute necessity. For us to adopt any other standpoint would make us in no way better than Voldemort. Surely you cannot fail to see that, Harry.”

Harry shook his head.

“All I can see is that both you and the Order are doomed to failure, unless you start getting serious about viewing this as a real conflict and treating it as such. I’m quite sure that I’m not the first person to tell you this, given that you have people like Kingsley and Professor Moody in the group. Your ridiculous methods of fighting are not in accord with the general will of the populace, but mine are. I’ll be right in the thick of things when the time comes, and I’ll give no quarter to that disgusting creature or his followers.”

“You are completely unwilling to reconsider your position on this, then?”

Harry noticed Dumbledore taking a sidelong glance into his bag, where the Dark Lord’s letter was plainly visible. Harry hadn’t taken any steps to hide it from view, and the thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. He didn’t particularly care that the old man had seen it, though. He could take it for whatever meaning he would. Harry casually cracked his knuckles and stretched his neck before answering Dumbledore’s rather pointless question.

“There’s nothing to think about. I’ve got a psychotic dark wizard out for my blood and a Prophecy stating that I must face him. When the final battle arrives, I intend to win, and to live on to bring about the world that my parents and godfather died for. To accomplish that end, I will use any and all means available to me. Including the Dark Arts which you so scorn.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a long moment and nodded, before looking back up at Harry with a grim expression.

“I see. I will again attest to my displeasure regarding the recent choices you are making, Harry. However, you are now an adult in the eyes of wizards and witches everywhere, and in the provisions of magical society’s oldest laws and customs. I cannot force you to adopt my ideas as your own, especially in light of the Ministry’s most recent proclamations regarding the use of the darker side of magic. I have always done my best to shield you from the harsher realities of

the world that we live in. But alas, it was simply not meant to be. The Boy-Who-Lived was never fated for a normal life.”

Harry smoothly ran a hand through his long hair.

“Perhaps not. If that was all you wanted to discuss, sir, I’d like to take my leave. Hopefully there’ll be something left of dinner still.”

With that, Harry began to rise. A wrinkled hand gripped his wrist, beckoning him to stay. He sat back down, more than a little bit annoyed.

“No, my boy. There is still something of paramount importance that I must discuss with you.”

That vague terminology briefly brought Harry back to the beginning of this entire mess, when he read Grilthauk’s letter back at the beginning of summer. Just barely two months, but still a lifetime ago. Harry doubted that whatever this particular old creature wanted to discuss would have as many benefits for him.

“And what is that, might I ask?”

The old man seemed to bear himself up slightly, the twinkle returning to his eye.

“I have realized, Harry, that I can no longer protect you from being forced to take an active role in this war. Especially following to yesterday’s events, the public will want to see their hero on the front lines battling against the forces of darkness. However, I am concerned that you might incur some considerable harm should you continue to fight without the proper guidance or support...”

Harry could barely resist the urge to snort in response to that comment.

“...It is for that reason that I have decided to induct you into the Order of the Phoenix.”

Harry had only been somewhat annoyed before, but he was completely so now. The old man dared to simply presume to all but tell him to join the Order, as if he had no say in the matter. So much for Dumbledore's previous acknowledgment of Harry's adult status. He did understand what the old man was attempting to do, at least on a basic level. Harry figured that Dumbledore was just now coming to realize how far out of his control the entire situation in the wizarding world had gone. He had lost the public's trust and Fudge was quite gleefully taking full advantage of it. That, coupled with Harry's own recent tendency to act contrary to his wishes, had left the old man reeling. He was desperate to regain some sort of handle on things before the surging wave of discontent swept him away entirely. He was planning to use Harry as a life preserver of sorts, needing the young wizard's popularity and newfound political muscle to retake his compromised position as the head of the forces of the light. Harry would be nobody's tool. There was only one answer to give the old man.

"I don't think so."

Dumbledore, who had been smiling somewhat victoriously, recoiled as if he had been shot.

"Excuse me? You refuse to join the Order?"

"I've already told you that I disagree with your personal ideology. You just aren't willing to do what needs to be done, and I'm not about to leap aboard a sinking ship."

"What exactly are you trying to say, Harry?"

Harry sighed. He had hoped to keep things somewhat cordial, but there seemed to be no help for it. The old man wasn't going to get the message unless he spoke bluntly.

"I'm trying to say that you're a wholly inept commander, whose errors in judgment and lack of foresight have caused more than a few lives to be lost in vain over the course of these two wars against Voldemort. You're possibly the most powerful wizard alive and a sage that could very well rival Merlin himself in terms of magical knowledge, but

you're a general in your own imagination only. My ragtag group of largely untrained students did more damage to Voldemort's forces in ten minutes yesterday afternoon than the Order has in the entirety of this war. I know that many of those same students would follow whatever path I choose to take, and would line up in droves to join the Order if I did. I'm not willing to put my life and theirs into your hands, given your faulty track record as a leader."

Dumbledore was completely stunned by this harangue. Harry kept his forest green eyes leveled upon the old wizard until he regained enough composure to speak again.

"I had hoped that you would perhaps be willing to put your newfound personal enmity towards me aside for the greater good, Harry. I see now, however, that you are irrevocably determined to do things in your own way."

The old man was getting desperate, Harry thought. Dumbledore was trying to make him feel guilty. It wasn't going to work.

"I'm determined to win this war, and not to waste lives in order to maintain some ridiculous code of moral ethics. I'll still be right at the front when there's fighting to be done, and I'll be perfectly willing to aid the Order in any way needed. I'm just not going to take my marching orders directly from you."

"Very well, then. Just remember, if you ever find yourself in need of counsel or assistance, my office door will always be open to you."

Harry supposed that he should at least respond politely.

"I appreciate that, professor."

He noticed Dumbledore take another quick glance at his open school bag, at the Dark Lord's unopened letter.

"Now, is there anything else that you would like to share with me, Harry?"

Whatever was in the letter was none of the old man's business. Besides, Harry could handle it on his own. He had no desire to confess to Dumbledore, and was more than reluctant to ask his advice so soon after this rather terse encounter.

"No, sir. Are we finished yet?"

"Yes, my boy. You may go. I must get prepared for Minister Fudge's visit tomorrow."

Harry nodded and departed without another word, grabbing his bag and leaving a defeated Albus Dumbledore behind. The old man was so full of mistaken assumptions and gross contradictions that he honestly hadn't proven all that difficult to best in an argument, as long as he could be forced to speak candidly and cease hiding behind riddles and half-truths. He had gone from accusing Harry of being his generation's answer to Voldemort to lauding him as the wizarding world's hero and demanding he join the Order in a matter of minutes. Dumbledore really was starting to lose it. It was rather pathetic, Harry mused. He chuckled under his breath as he walked back over to Gryffindor Tower, already knowing that he had missed dinner. If nothing else, he would get to bed early.

The following afternoon found Harry lounging about with Ron and the twins out on the grounds in front of the lake. After a late evening meal, a plate of roast beef and boiled potatoes that his friends had taken the trouble to fix for him after he hadn't showed up in the Great Hall, and a quick exchange of the day's stories with Hermione and Ron, Harry had rushed up to sleep. Ron had taken his teacher to an even stalemate in his class, which left Harry to believe that the redhead had simply let him win a few chess games earlier in the summer. Either that or his dakaathi intelligence was a step above that of any normal human.

According to Hermione, Snape's NEWT Potions class was filled predominantly with Slytherins, many of whom could in no way have fulfilled the stringent entrance requirements that the greasy old bat held everybody else to. Despite being the sole Gryffindor in the class, she had been left more or less alone by the serpents, most of whom were seemingly too terrified of Harry after his exploits during the battle to risk physically attacking one of his closest friends. They

would rediscover their pitiful excuses for backbones sooner or later, Harry mused, but for the moment they were shell-shocked and intimidated. It pleased him that these Death Eater spawn were afraid of him. He was also relieved, though he didn't express it, to find that his own three Slytherin associates were all in the class, along with a smattering of Ravenclaws and a pair of Hufflepuffs. If Malfoy and his cronies were to try anything with Hermione down there in the future, she would have enough support to be able to hold her own.

He had miraculously managed to wake up early enough to make it out to the Quidditch Pitch with time to spare. Katie hadn't worked him particularly hard. She reckoned that there was plenty of time to get him acquainted with his newfound position before the team's opening match with Ravenclaw. It seemed rather anticlimactic that he would be facing Cho in the first game of the new season, with the last being against the terminally floundering Hufflepuff squad. He adapted as easily as his apparent coach had foretold, though it was still a bit too early to tell for sure. All he did was run through a few formations and work on aiming the Quaffle through the unguarded hoops. Katie told him rather dryly that he would need to start working against an active Keeper in the next few days, and that it was his responsibility to drag Ron out of bed before sunrise. Harry wasn't looking forward to the task.

After the ninety-minute practice session had ended with the sun still only beginning to rise, Harry walked off into one of the locker rooms to take a shower. Katie followed him for a brief moment, before catching herself and thinking better of it. That was fine by him, as he really didn't want to have to explain his wings away yet again, and was only aiming to clean himself up and go to an early breakfast. The morning's edition of the Daily Prophet had been filled with another round of scathing editorials aimed at Dumbledore, mostly alluding to his questionable hiring practices and powerlessness to stop the attacks during Harry's second year at Hogwarts. Harry almost felt sorry for the old man, and would probably use his personal clout to keep him from getting sacked as Headmaster if it came down to it. Dumbledore was the only real barrier preventing Voldemort from making a direct attack upon the school, and it was in Harry's best interests to keep him in his position. He had no doubts that the serpentine madman could marshal enough forces to lay siege to the

castle if the opportunity presented itself, despite the heavy casualties that the forces of darkness had taken during the failed attack on the train. He didn't really think that the Hogwarts Board of Governors would even consider firing the old man under the present circumstances, regardless.

Harry's only class for that day had been Charms in the morning. He found himself paired off with Neville, as Ron had jumped to work with Hermione. Harry wasn't blind to how his redheaded friend felt about the girl, and didn't take it at all personally. Besides, it gave him an opportunity to be able to work directly with Neville, who would need some extensive training if he were to be considered for Harry's personal crack unit. He intended to start narrowing down his list of candidates without delay, as soon as he found time to discuss the Ravenclaw situation with his Chinese confidant. The lesson itself really hadn't been anything particularly noteworthy, as Flitwick had set them to learning advanced shielding charms, promising to place an emphasis upon actual dueling spells in his advanced class. Harry already knew all of the incantations, though he generally preferred to let his armaments take care of deflecting curses for him rather than wasting time and energy erecting defensive barriers. He played the attacker for the entire lesson, sending harmless spells at Neville as the pudgy boy tried his best to deflect them. He seemed to have a basic understanding of the charm by the end of the class. Perhaps he wasn't completely hopeless after all.

After class, Hermione had taken off for Herbology, leaving Harry and Ron with nothing to do. After a quick lunch, the two decided to head out onto the grounds to enjoy the day and met up with Fred and George en route. Harry himself was leaned against a spruce tree, absently fumbling with his emerald snitch necklace and enjoying the view on the water. He was dressed in his breastplate, along with a shirt and trousers, and opened school robes over the rest. He turned his head lazily upon being addressed by one of the Weasley twins. He guessed George, but couldn't really tell.

"So, Harry, where'd you get off to this morning? I know you didn't just jump out of bed before sunrise for no reason."

“Quidditch drills. Katie seems to think I should be moved over to Chaser this season.”

Ron nearly spat up the mouthful of bottled water that he was drinking.

“Has she gone out of her bloody mind...? You’re practically the best Seeker that Hogwarts has seen in centuries. And she wants you to change positions...?”

“She wants to keep Ginny playing Seeker. Thinks she’s poorly suited to being on the Chaser line and is good enough at her current position to beat any of the opposition.”

Fred added in his thoughts.

“Malfoy’s a disgrace, and I don’t think Hufflepuff can dig anybody up worth mentioning. But Chang’s gonna fly circles around Ginny. She’s way too good and way too experienced.”

“Oh dear, my ears are burning.”

That comment heralded the arrival of the Ravenclaw Seeker, who slid right into the middle their group as if it was completely natural for her to be mingling with a party of Gryffindors. She apparently had no classes that day, as she was out of school uniform, dressed only in a sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts. After a soft kiss, Cho sidled up against Harry, grimacing uncomfortably at coming up against his body armor. He tucked her head underneath his chin, rather enjoying the way she seemed to fit perfectly into him. Fred couldn’t resist taking a jibe at the newcomer.

“Looks like we’ve got us a spy. Listening in on our Quidditch plans, are you? You know the penalty for espionage.”

His twin joined in.

“No, I don’t think she goes, brother of mine. Shall we enlighten the lady?”

“Indeed we shall, Fred. As recompense for spying...”

“You’ll have to...”

“Agree to test out our next line of products...”

“Completely free of charge.”

Cho lightly swatted the snitch from Harry’s necklace away from her face, where its wings had been tickling her cheek, before responding with a smile.

“But it’s not my fault that you’re shouting out your game plans where anybody can hear. What you ought to be doing is picking out the right brand of polish for the Cup. I can tell you right now that Ravenclaw will be expecting it to be nice and shiny when you lot hand it over to us at the end of the season.”

Ron sat up from where he had been sprawled out on the grass, laughing loudly. By this point, Harry was lazily playing with a lock of Cho’s shining hair, with his other arm snaked around her waist.

“Ravenclaw winning the Quidditch Cup? Oh, that’s a good one, Chang. Not a bloody chance.”

Cho responded indignantly, though she was enjoying Harry’s attention too much to be fully angry.

“And you would certainly be the authority on hopeless Quidditch teams, seeing as you support the Cannons.”

“Better than being a fair-weather Tornadoes fan.”

Harry, despite rather enjoying watching his would-be girlfriend and his best friend argue, decided to smooth things over before the situation got heated. He interjected into the conversation jokingly.

“Calm yourselves, ladies. Merlin, Ron, you just don’t know how to talk to a woman. I used to think that it was just something you shared with Hermione, but now I’m not so sure.”

Ron responded with equal good humor, blushing redder than his hair at the mention of Hermione. Harry noncommittally decided to make sure to get them together somehow.

“And you’re just a regular heartthrob. The next Gilderoy Lockhart, that’s what you are. Except a whole lot uglier and only slightly less of a bloody fraud.”

Harry sneered back.

“Oh, I’m certainly a hoax, but ugly? I very much resent that, mate. Cho, am I ugly?”

Obsidian eyes looked up to regard him, glistening in the sunlight in an identical fashion to her hair.

“Positively hideous. I just might have to dump you for that strapping Malfoy boy.”

“I wasn’t aware that the rodent look was in style. I really ought to keep up with these things.”

The twins jumped in again, speaking as one. Harry idly wondered how they managed to do that.

“Well, we both think you’re quite bonny, Harry. As it turns out, so does most of the female student body.”

Harry turned to look at them with a laugh, as Ron glanced over into his bag and fished something out.

“You know it. And look, he’s already getting love letters. Not even two days into the term, even. You’d better be keeping a close eye on this one, Chang.”

Harry whipped his head around to Ron, already knowing what he was holding. Indeed, it was Voldemort’s letter, still unopened. He had been too tired the previous evening to bother with it, and hadn’t had the time or privacy to read it since.

He snatched it from Ron before the redhead noticed the Dark Mark on the seal.

“Oh, this letter? Yeah, it’s a love letter, for sure. I have it on good authority that Voldemort’s always lusted after my tight little arse. He must be really getting horny to send me a direct proposition, though.”

Ron’s eyebrows shot up.

“Blimey, mate. That’s from You-Know-Who? Why’s he sending owl post to you, of all people?”

“Couldn’t tell you. I haven’t read it yet. I’d imagine that it’s just the usual retinue of death threats, though. Rather pathetic, that the Dark Lord has to resort to sending me nasty letters in the mail.”

Cho piped in, an incredulous look on her pretty face.

“When did that come in?”

“Last night. I was on my way to visit the old bastard, didn’t quite need to have whatever’s in here fresh on my mind. It’s none of Dumbledore’s business, and I’m not entirely sure I could hold off his Legilimency if he really wanted to pry in.”

“You’ve had a day, Harry. You really should at least read it, whatever it is.”

“We can all take a look. Here, make me some space.”

As requested, the assorted Weasleys cleared out some room in front of Harry. The dakaathi hybrid broke the seal on the letter through focusing a bit of his magic, watching it dissipate into a cloud of green mist and float away in the breeze. He unfurled the long piece of parchment in front of him, noting that Voldemort’s spidery scrawl seemed to be written in blood.

Salutations, Harry Potter

Naturally, you must be surprised to have received a letter from yours truly. I must imagine that you had visions of death threats and

pointless taunts as you broke the seal. Allow me to assure you that you will find no such things contained here. Well, perhaps just one fleeting comment, if you'll forgive my imposition. Your rutting Muggle swine of a cousin squealed quite accordingly during his torture, and sadly lost control of both bladder and bowel before meeting his end. Young Malfoy would assuredly be more than willing to give you a more telling description, should you be interested. After all, he was the one that quite happily uttered the curse that finally took the boy's life. On a side note, you might be pleased to hear that Wormtail slipped on your cousin's urine. I sincerely hope that you enjoyed our birthday gift to you. It was Bella's idea, as she rather forcefully insisted that I let you know. A few of the more daring among the faithful ventured to sample the pork before the festivities concluded. We would have sent you a sample as well, but I somehow doubt that roasted Muggle keeps well in the mail.

But you did appreciate the gesture, did you not? Lord Voldemort is not unaware of the torment that you suffered at the hands of those creatures, Harry. Know that we will eventually return for the parents, and that your aunt and uncle will suffer infinitely more than their disgusting excuse for a son. Oh, dear. I seem to recall promising not to taunt or threaten, and here I am rambling on. Rather like that old fool Dumbledore, really. It sickens me to think of it. But, now on to the point of this correspondence, I believe. I would rather like for you to be at my side as your Muggle relations scream to the heavens for mercy that they will not receive.

Indeed, Harry, I have very recently undergone a change of opinion concerning you. Just for a moment, try to imagine my surprise as I make a brief sojourn to the battlefield of my admittedly ill-fated assault on the school train, intent on punishing my officers for being derelict in reporting news of my victory, only to find them slaughtered on the drenched earth. Obliterated by spells that even I tend to show restraint in using. Truly, the most gruesome of dark curses cannot be employed too often, lest their overall seductive appeal be compromised. Every cell in my body tingled in anticipation of a duel with such an artist in cruelty. I still haven't quite managed to deduce exactly what you did to those poor fools nearest the wreckage. And then, I discover Bella transfigured into a dairy cow in the middle of the battlefield, racked with the aftereffects of the Cruciatus. She tells me

that you, the supposed golden hero of the light, were the architect of this massacre. Surely something is amiss, no?

You are not the mere boy that I have so long taken you for. You have delved into the arcane, far deeper even than I had at your age. You have tasted the sweet nectar of the darkness, and from what can be obviously seen from your battle, you enjoyed it immensely. But what you have learned thus far marks only the barest beginnings of the true potential of the darkest magic. Join me, and I will teach you the true nature of the power that you were born to command. I have often longed for an apprentice to whom I might impart the knowledge that I have largely devoted my lifetime to acquiring. You are the one I have chosen, Harry. You are the only one who is worthy. You have the power, the will, and the motive to become a warlock surpassing even myself. You lack only the direction. I can give you that.

I have made this offer before, and you have refused. But the circumstances are different now, for both of us. I have lately seen the futility of pursuing true immortality. It is, as the filthy Muggle saying goes, a pipe dream. I will pursue an everlasting legacy in another fashion, what could be termed as the natural fashion. I will endow a successor. At first, I gave consideration to producing a child of my own loins, through any of my several dedicated female followers. However, that is a gamble in itself. Even with my bloodline, a child could be a weakling. Young Malfoy is a walking testament to this: a completely pathetic excuse for a wizard born to a pair of the most powerful and pedigreed purebloods our society has to offer. I have no desire to sire a squib, as I am certain you will understand.

But there is one, worthy beyond any doubt of being the successor to the world that I would conquer. Naturally, that is you. Join me, and the world that we will create together will fall to you once I am gone from this world. Think of it, Harry. The entire world, and all that comes with it. Power beyond compare, the knowledge that your will can never be challenged, no matter how lofty your desire. Wealth and companionship, the very two things to which you have always been entitled, yet always denied. Any woman in the world could be yours on command. My previous scans of your innermost thoughts have provided me with the knowledge that you have long been smitten with the former girlfriend of that useless spare. Give the word, Harry, and

our Death Eaters will bring her to your feet in chains to do your bidding for as long and as often as you like. You belong with us, Harry. You are a lord, not a servant. You are not a tool to be used and cast aside by that manipulative old coot. You are not a sacrificial offering for these bleating sheep in the wizarding world, to be praised one moment and reviled the next. You are not a ripened host to be leeches upon by pitiful Mudbloods and flattering blood traitors like those abominable Weasleys. Come to my side, and show them all what you are truly capable of. I await your decision.

You need not reply now. My loyal followers and I will await you at the central square of Hogsmeade at the stroke of midnight on Halloween. Think well, and make your choice. I trust that you will choose wisely.

Deepest regards,

Voldemort, Dark Lord of the Realm

Harry kept his face impassive as he read, but became increasingly vexed on the inside. That the murderer of Harry's real parents would dare to make overtures at adopting the young wizard as his own son made his blood boil, though not a murmur escaped his lips. If he were to analyze the situation logically, the Dark Lord's offer was sensible. It would be much easier for him to ally with him and crush the old man in a single encounter, then either wait for the serpentine bastard to kick or just take find some opportunity to assassinate him. That wasn't to say that the thought of accepting even crossed Harry's mind. He would never lower himself to kneeling before that creature, now would his friends and followers would never forgive him if he did. Noticing that his fellows seemed to be waiting on him to say something, he voiced a thought, albeit one that completely failed to reflect anything that he was actually thinking.

"Well, I certainly seem to be popular these days..."

That sparked a flurry of angry remarks, though none were directed at Harry. Cho particularly seemed a bit upset, mostly due to the insinuation that the Dark Lord would force her into being somebody's sex slave. Voldemort's rather churlish mention of Cedric Diggory hadn't helped matters. Her former boyfriend was still a sore spot for her, even if she was more or less past his death by that point. She

calmed down after a few minutes, though, and was back to her smiling self. The Weasleys were indignant as well, in their case about the comment made regarding their family. Ron finally spoke up with a sneer.

“Bloody bastard sure loves to hear himself talk, doesn’t he?”

Harry nodded.

“I can pretty much confirm that, mate. Sort of leads me to wonder just how many times he read this damned letter out loud to himself before actually sending it.”

“I dunno, but we’ve got no time to ponder the question. Don’t look now, but King Midas and the full royal entourage are headed right this way.”

The remaining four heads turned simultaneously to follow Ron’s line of vision. And indeed, hideously decked out in his trademark checkered robes and lime green bowler hat was Cornelius Oswald Fudge, the not-so-esteemed Minister for Magic, at the head of a large party of assorted Ministry officials, many of whom were his own personal cronies. Fudge was grinning like a Cheshire Cat as he swaggered up to Harry’s position and extended his hand.

“Well, now, if it isn’t Harry Potter. Just the young man I’ve been looking for.”

(End Chapter Fifteen)

Author’s Note: Glory hallelujah, I’m finally free of bloody research papers. Just sent in my last essay a few hours ago. Now I just have finals to traipse through next week and I’m home free. Expect me to get back to my usual, faster update schedule here directly. Believe me, folks, I’d rather be writing this story than writing school papers. Anyway, a few comments.

I’m trying to find a happy medium between working with some relatively heavy content pertaining to Harry’s mission and alliances, and some lighter stuff regarding more mundane school pursuits, like

classes and Quidditch. I hope I'm doing a good job of that now. As much as I'm sure some people would like me to focus entirely on Harry's scheming and plotting, he does have an actual life outside of it as well.

Well...I would put a bit more here, but I'm honestly too sleepy to think of anything else. I imagine that I've made you lot wait long enough for an update, so I'm taking pains to get it posted before I go to bed. I'm sure there are some errors that need to be proofread, but I'll take care of that in the morning. Later, all. Don't forget to review.

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Chapter Sixteen: Mutual Insincerity - A Slight Understanding

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry glanced up to meet the conniving politician’s eye, taking note of the slight hint of distrust that lingered beneath Fudge’s otherwise amiable expression, though he was sure that the Minister for Magic was trying his hardest to hide it. It wasn’t particularly hostile, unlike the complete loathing that the man had treated Harry with at the young wizard’s court hearing during the summer before fifth year, but enough to tell him that Fudge was only treating him with civility for the sake of personal advantage. Or perhaps he simply had some reservations about approaching the young man that had killed nearly fifty people in less than half an hour just a few days prior. Harry didn’t particularly care either way, rising effortlessly to his feet and bringing Cho up with him. He shook Fudge’s proffered hand gently, a cynical smile playing at his lips. He was vaguely aware of Ron and the twins watching the exchange with curiosity.

“Good afternoon, Minister. How’s the inspection going?”

“Very well, thank you. I just thought I’d drop by and ask how you’re holding up after that whole mess with the train.”

Harry took a moment to formulate his reply, instead glancing around at Fudge's sizable escort, which had just caught up to their position. As usual, he was flanked by a good number of Aurors. There were a total of eight guards, separated into two groups of four at the front and rear of the inspection party. Kingsley commanded the rear group, while the front was being held by one of the Minister's lead stooges, the stocky, powerfully built Auror Dawlish. Harry remembered with a twinge of anger that he was the one that had assisted Umbridge in attacking McGonagall and Hagrid the previous term. Casting aside the urge to slap the idiot grin off of the man's face, he looked over at the inspectors themselves.

As completely expected, Percy was standing right at Fudge's side, wearing his horned glasses and smiling sycophantically, parchment and quill ready at hand. Another face he recognized was Amelia Bones, Susan's aunt and the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Amos Diggory was also present. Harry noticed the bearded man's eyes darting between him and Cho, who was still languidly attached to his side, with a distinct frown. Bringing up the very rear of the array was Arthur Weasley, who looked for the entire world as if he would rather have been doing anything besides parading around with his errant son and Fudge. Harry was a bit surprised to see that Dolores Umbridge wasn't in the group. Apparently, the old toad had fallen out of favor with the Minister and his circle. A reporter and photographer for the Daily Prophet were present as well, keeping near the rear of the group. The rest of the task force was unfamiliar to Harry, who then deigned to answer Fudge's query.

"Well, things are as good as can be expected. I think getting back into the normal routine of school is helping to get us all through the shock of it. It's just still a bit hard to believe that he would actually attack the school train."

The Minister nodded fervently. Harry noticed several members of the entourage shaking their heads along with him. He considered the display to be entirely ridiculous. Naturally, he wasn't really all that surprised that Voldemort would stoop to attacking a train full of children, but said so anyway just to get past the formalities and find out exactly what Fudge wanted.

“Unthinkable, yes. Still, Dumbledore should have been prepared for such a thing. I can tell you that nothing like this will be happening again, though. There will be a full platoon of Aurors stationed aboard that train come the winter holidays, even if I have to come and assign them personally.”

Harry nodded. It hadn't taken Fudge long to bring up the old man. He decided to flatter the bumbling fool a bit and see what came of it. Hopefully he could reach some sort of understanding with the man and thus gain a bit of leverage on Dumbledore within the school.

“It's nice to see that somebody's concerned for our safety. By the way, congratulations of getting all that new legislation passed the other day. It'll be certain to advance the overall war effort by leaps and bounds. You should have seen the looks on some of the prominent Death Eaters' children's faces yesterday morning. And I'd bet their parents are every bit as worried.”

The Minister looked positively smug at the compliments. The Daily Prophet reporter furiously copied down Harry's comments, leaving the young wizard with no doubt that they'd be in the paper the next morning. In the end, this entire inspection was nothing but a glorified photo opportunity for Fudge. Harry noticed Arthur Weasley giving him an odd look, as if somewhat horrified to see him talking pleasantly with the Minister. He imagined that Ron and the twins bore similar expressions. Kingsley looked decidedly pensive as well, and probably had a better idea as to what Harry was actually up to. It certainly seemed as if this gathering would be a topic of conversation at the next Order meeting. That being the case, Harry resolved to really give them something to talk about. As he reflected, Fudge replied.

“Well, we've made quite a few mistakes over this past year. You wouldn't believe some of the things that I was being told. Constantly hearing that you were a liar and a delinquent and all that. Lucius Malfoy and that horrid Dolores Umbridge woman were entirely to blame, Harry. They were my most trusted advisors, and yet they knowingly deceived me. But I've realized the truth now, and we're prepared to do what needs to be done. Please, allow me to apologize on behalf of the entire Ministry of Magic for everything that we've put

you through. I just hope that we can put it behind us and work together against our common enemy.”

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He briefly wondered how Fudge could even speak without choking on all the tripe that he spewed forth. He could hardly have expected the man to own up to his share of the blame for the Ministry smear campaign that Harry had been forced to endure, though. Not when there were so many others that it could be pinned on. Shit rolled downhill, yet another Muggle phrase that seemed to apply to the situation. Still, Fudge wasn't lying entirely. Malfoy and Umbridge had indeed likely led the man along by the nose. At any rate, Harry didn't particularly need an apology. He would wreak his own vengeance upon the Ministry in due time. But for the time being, he could only accept with a smile.

“Consider it forgiven. We all make mistakes, after all. I'm just glad to see that we're all finally on the same page.”

“The feeling is completely mutual, my boy. Now, I hear that you have plans to enter the Auror Academy once you've finished your schooling here? I certainly hope so. The Ministry needs more fine and intelligent young men like yourself.”

Now he was laying it on thick, Harry thought. The fact that he was openly participating in this whole charade was almost enough to make him gag, but he recognized the importance of having the Minister for Magic in his corner. He had already stroked the man's ego as much as he could without being overly conspicuous, so he decided to finish off this little game by tossing the blustering politician a little gold.

“I appreciate the compliment, Minister. Now, would anyone in your party happen to have a quill and parchment that I can borrow for a moment?”

Fudge nodded with a smile.

“Of course. Percival, if you don't mind?”

Percy swaggered forward arrogantly and handed Harry a quill and a piece of parchment. Taking it with a barely disguised sneer, he wrote down a brief note for Gringotts and handed it to the Minister. Fudge's eyes shined with avarice as he read the writing. The man was practically beaming as he looked up to Harry for an explanation. The latter provided one.

"In light of the Ministry's new mandate concerning the seizure of known Death Eaters' bank accounts, I have decided to donate a sum of twenty five thousand Galleons from the Black fortunes to help fund the Auror department. I am the established lord of the family, after all. To my eternal shame, a great number of the Blacks choose to support the Dark Lord, either directly or in spirit. I offer this meager contribution as a means of compensation for their unworthy actions."

"We gratefully accept. I promise that your generous donation will be put to good use. Now, we had better be getting on with our investigation. It was good seeing you again, Harry. If you ever need any assistance, don't hesitate to let me know. Have a nice day."

With that, Fudge led his party off in the direction of the castle. Harry doubted that their investigation would amount to much of anything. He was left rather confident that he'd managed to tentatively secure the Minister's trust with his little display. The chance meeting also eliminated any compunction Harry might have held about putting Fudge out of the way once the man had outlived his usefulness. Harry had held just the slightest bit of faith that Fudge had genuinely turned over a new leaf. The gleam in his eyes upon seeing Harry's money order told the young wizard otherwise. The corrupt politico's song might have changed since the Department of Mysteries, but the overall act was still very much the same. That was all the thinking that Harry was allowed to do on the matter, as an empty water bottle impacted the back of his head and snapped him back into the world around him. He turned to find Ron and the twins looking at him as if he had grown a second head.

"What the bloody Hell was that all about, mate?"

"What are you talking about, Ron?"

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You and Fudge acting like long lost siblings or whatever. I thought you hated the Ministry.”

Harry shook his head with silent laughter. He waited until the Minister and his cronies were long out of earshot before replying. He made sure not to talk much about his personal agenda, seeing as he hadn’t yet directly approached Fred and George about joining him.

“I do, but it’s important to have the idiot on our side for the moment. Voldemort is the largest and closest threat, and we need the Ministry to be actively against him. Besides, I won’t have to worry about the old man’s authority as much if I have Fudge’s personal backing.”

The twins seemed to sense his reluctance, and one of them said something that surprised him. Meanwhile, Harry slid back into his position against the spruce tree, again bringing Cho gently down with him.

“Oh, and don’t worry about us. Ron told us everything the other night.”

Harry returned the comment with a suspicious air in his voice.

“Told you everything about what?”

The other twin picked up the conversation.

“About you being against the old coot and all that. We’re with you. Just a mite tiffed that you didn’t tell us earlier. Merlin, even Bill knew before us, and you’ve talked to him like once.”

“Quite a bit more than once. Actually, Bill knew about all this before anybody else. My friends at Gringotts had him training me over the summer. Your eldest brother packs one Hell of a Stunner. Damn near shattered my ribs once. He was also keeping an eye on the Order for me while I was away.”

Cho interrupted him with a slightly annoyed voice.

“Harry, will you please take this bloody breastplate off already? It’s making my neck hurt.”

“You’re the one who asked me to wear it in the first place...”

“Yes, so I could look at it. I didn’t say that I wanted to use it as a pillow.”

Harry shrugged and removed the armor, placing it at his side. Cho rolled her head over and began to examine the scene crafted onto the front. Meanwhile, Harry placed the letter from Voldemort back into his bag and sealed it. He discussed random things with Ron and the twins while Cho kept herself occupied with his breastplate. Soon enough, the sun began to wane in the sky. The trio of redheads rose to leave.

“We’re taking off and leaving you two lovebirds alone, mate. Try and make it in for dinner this time, could you? We don’t want to listen to Mione and Ginny complain about you not eating.”

Harry smirked.

“I’m still pretty stuffed with tripe from all that garbage I told Fudge earlier.”

“I hear you, but at least show up.”

“Right, see you in the Great Hall.”

And so, Harry was left alone with the distracted Cho. He played with the fringe of raven hair behind her ear, as she remained oblivious to the entire world around her. After roughly half an hour of this, he got a bit annoyed.

“Cho...”

He got no response.

“I’m off to the Astronomy Tower. I’ve got a date with the Patil twins and a bottle of chocolate syrup...”

She only hummed back.

“All right, you asked for it...”

Harry picked up Ron’s empty water bottle from the ground and walked over to the lake. Bending over, he dipped the bottle under the surface and allowed it to fill. He softly cast a Cooling Charm, and then stalked quietly back over to Cho and dumped the chilled water onto her head. That got her attention. She turned and glared at Harry with a loud shriek.

“What in Merlin’s name was that for, Potter?”

“Don’t call me by that name, and I had to get your attention somehow. Was my breastplate really all that interesting?”

“It was, as a matter of fact. See, that’s obviously you up in the center...”

Harry shifted his gaze over to where Cho was pointing. He didn’t like where this line of discussion was inevitably headed.

“Indeed.”

“So then, I can’t quite figure out who the two girls standing on either side of you are.”

“One’s my secret girlfriend. You know, the one in Hogsmeade.”

Of course, Harry had no intention of telling her that he really did have a girlfriend in Hogsmeade. Cho took it as a joke, and responded teasingly.

“And I suppose that the other would be Malfoy in a kimono?”

“That’s not very nice, Cho. Just because his father likes to prance about the family manor in women’s clothing doesn’t mean that he does.”

Cho laughed, her annoyance at being drenched seemingly forgotten. Her face turned serious again a moment later, though. Another of her instantaneous mood switches.

“But honestly, Harry. Do you know who they are?”

Harry sighed. She obviously wasn't going to be led off that easily. He didn't like lying to her, but he just couldn't risk losing either her or his other serious mate, Hitomi. They both satisfied him in different ways, though he couldn't quite describe what they were. He did know that he needed them both in his life. Some pieces of the complex puzzle that was Harry's life started to fall into place at that moment. The two beauties on the breastplate, along with the sun and moon shining together in the sky above them and the composite stone within his masterpiece wand. They all represented these two women. Everything else would make sense sooner or later, but he just needed to buy some time now.

“Not really. I would at least hope that one of them is you. I've been taking all of this mess as it comes. It's rather obvious that fate has quite a bit in store for me, and for us. Still, we can't waste time and energy worrying about discerning the future, not when we have so much to deal with just in the here and now. I really don't know about the other girl, but we'll just have to cross that bridge when we reach it.”

Cho snorted somewhat indignantly.

“Must be rather nice for you. I'm the who'll have to deal with sharing.”

“Don't be like that. You have a special place within my heart that nobody else can touch. Whatever comes to pass, that much will never change. That area remained yours even as it ached and bled from seeing you with Cedric Diggory. There's no need to doubt me.”

Harry winced internally even as the words came out of his mouth. It was a low shot, albeit an unintentional one. He had always had that murmur of resentment about what Cho and Cedric had shared together, and this wasn't the first time that it had manifested itself. He could have kicked himself for letting that comment slip out. After a

rather tense pause, she made a reply that he hadn't been expecting at all.

"It was the same for me, you know."

Harry blinked in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

Sparkling obsidian orbs bored into his forest green.

"Part of me only wanted to be with you, even while I was seeing Cedric. You have no idea how much it hurt me when I had to turn you down for the Yule Ball. If it weren't for my already having a date, I would have said yes in less than a second."

Harry laughed lightly.

"I'll never forget asking you out that day. Merlin, I must have looked so pathetic."

"I actually thought it was rather cute. Though I will admit that it became a bit annoying when you still couldn't even hold a conversation with me a year later."

"Well, I was good enough at shouting at you..."

Cho snuggled up against him again with an amused smile.

"You know, I'm glad that we're having this talk. I've needed to say this for awhile, Harry. I'm really sorry about the way things turned out with us last year. I was such a mess. That part of me still wanted only to be yours, but the rest just felt so horrible about even considering moving on from Cedric. Even while I kissed you before winter break, that other part of me was tearing up at my supposed betrayal. But I'm past all that now. I'll always cherish Cedric's memory, but I don't think that I could honestly say that I ever truly loved him."

"How does that work? If you didn't love him, why was it so hard to move on?"

"It's hard to explain. I mean, don't get me wrong. I liked Cedric a lot. He was really sweet and devoted, and always put my happiness in front of his own. He tried so hard for me. I think that he probably loved me. He was also everything that my father wants for me. Cedric was handsome and intelligent, and he came from a respectable and connected family. The perfect catch for the daughter of a family looking to climb onto the first rung of the social ladder. So, it was for good reason that part of me thought that I could have a perfect life with Cedric Diggory. But despite all that, I could never bring myself to genuinely return his feelings. And believe me, I tried. But I couldn't help always kept thinking about you."

Harry's reply came more as a statement than a question.

"And you hated yourself for that."

Cho nodded in the affirmative.

"I felt like such a terrible person. Every day while we were together, Cedric would tell me how much he adored me and how happy I made him. I never once said anything like that back to him. When he came back from the Third Task dead, all I could think about was how he had been so singularly dedicated to me, and that I had done nothing but betray his feelings the entire time. And even then, that part of me still only wanted to run over and jump into your arms. I was just so hurt and confused, and I ended up trying to use you as a crutch. You deserved better."

"You don't need to apologize again. I understand."

And he honestly did. Funny how he had just blurted out the comment about Cedric in a hurried attempt to change the subject of conversation, and had wound up with a much better understanding of Cho as a result. Deep in the recesses of his mind, he had always known that he would have to have this discussion with her before things got too serious between them. It had gone better than he had expected.

"You know, you've really grown up."

Harry shrugged lazily.

“Haven’t really had any other choice. It seems like all the pressure in the world has been piling right onto my shoulders lately.”

“But you aren’t alone, Harry. You know that, don’t you? You have all of your friends, and your ancestor’s former helpers, and even Dumbledore and the Ministry if you really need them. And you have me. You have the support of the entire magical world. So don’t try to take everything on by yourself. I might have made it past Cedric’s death, but I’m pretty sure that I couldn’t bear losing you.”

Instead of responding verbally, Harry just pressed his lips against hers.

[Content removed]

His good mood carried over into the following morning, as he lounged about in his four poster bed. Cho had abandoned the Ravenclaw Table at supper the previous night and gone over to sit next to Harry. The move had earned her a sharp glare from Marietta Edgecombe and jealous stares from several of the Gryffindor girls. Thankfully, the faculty’s resident ninja had chosen not to partake of a British supper. Actually, Harry hadn’t seen her at the Head Table since breakfast on the first day of classes. She had apparently dawn her conclusions about Hogwarts cuisine quickly. Nobody had spoken a word of the episode with Fudge during the mealtime conversation, having a silent understanding that it would be much better to let everybody else see it in the Daily Prophet, where it would likely be a feature story.

Having two of her most difficult classes to contend with the next day, Katie had excused Harry from their morning practice during supper. Harry only had Transfiguration himself, but that alone was sure to be a daunting chore. McGonagall was a slave driver in her regular classes, so her advanced course was likely to be nothing short of barbaric. At least he didn’t have to deal with trying to drag Ron out of bed early. And so, with a full night’s sleep under his belt, he rose to face the new day. The rest of his dorm mates with the exception of the aforementioned redhead, who was still sleeping like a stone, were likewise getting out of bed. Figuring that none of them would be any

good for a conversation for at least a half an hour, Harry went to take his morning shower.

Once clean, he rifled through his trunk for something to wear. He was on the withdrawing of getting out another set of generic Hogwarts robes when he changed his mind. Harry took out his gold and sapphire blue yukata, a favorite that he hadn't worn since the morning of Padfoot's will reading, as well as the requisite straw sandals and kodachi. He briefly mused that he had some sort of death wish, being out of school uniform when he had a class with McGonagall.

Harry got a few odd looks for his unorthodox choice of clothing upon reaching the Great Hall for breakfast. He paused only to sneer at the Slytherins in the room, silently daring any of them to speak up on the subject. Not a single one of them did. Dumbledore seemed to find his choice of clothing to be extremely amusing and flashed him a twinkling smile. His friends from his own house had yet to arrive. Blaise was up early, but Harry didn't quite feel like going over to sit there. He didn't quite have enough of an audience to make raising that particular ruckus worth his while. Nowhere to go, he just reclined down at the Gryffindor Table and grabbed a bagel from one of the serving trays. The hot meal wouldn't be served for a few minutes yet.

Cho and a group of her friends came in presently. Harry caught her eye, and she nodded towards an empty space at her house's table next to where she was just then sitting down. He felt that he owed her the favor, and it couldn't do any harm to chat up a few of the Ravenclaws. Besides, the sneak was sitting nearby, and he might get a chance to take a couple of digs at her. He lazily slid into the indicated spot on the bench.

"Morning, beautiful. Early breakfast?"

"Had trouble sleeping."

"I tend to have that effect on people."

A few of Cho's girlfriends giggled. It annoyed Harry a bit, but he said nothing. Increasingly more people were filing into the hall, and the early morning dishes started to vanish from the table with the more

traditional breakfast foods taking their places. Michael Corner sat down across from the pair.

“Now, forgive me if I’m mistaken, but something seems to be a bit out of place here. What’s the shining hero of Gryffindor Tower doing sitting with a bunch of lame bookworms like us?”

Harry replied with a flippant tone. He had expected the boy to bring up the DA again. Harry really didn’t care to waste his time teaching the better part of the student body basic spells when Alastor Moody was there and far more than qualified to do the job, but he would condescend if the demand were great enough. He would have enough trouble with trying to train his own squad when they were selected without having to schedule DA and keep the former group secret from the remainder of the latter.

“Well, none of my esteemed housemates seem to have dragged their arses out of the bed yet. It was either you lot or the serpents. Difficult choice, but here I am. Besides, the scenery is a lot nicer over here.”

Harry slung an arm around Cho as he spoke the last sentence. She puffed up in mock indignation.

“So I’m just a decoration, is that it?”

“That and a damn fine snogging partner. You all wouldn’t believe some of the things this girl does with her tongue. Positively brilliant, definitely worthy of a Ravenclaw mind.”

Cho blushed crimson, while some of the male members of her house laughed heartily. Harry spooned out a large bowl of oatmeal and poured a copious amount of honey on top. An older boy that he had never spoken a word to glanced over his Japanese robes and ventured a comment.

“Nice threads, Potter. You mind telling me where you got ‘em?”

“These were a gift from a family that I stayed with over the summer. I have a whole set besides just these up in my dormitory. If you’re really interested, some acquaintances of mine have just opened up a

Japanese robe shop down in Hogsmeade. All the work is tailor made, so it's probably expensive. I might check the place out myself next time we're allowed to visit the village. See if they've got some new designs or whatever."

Corner couldn't resist taking a jibe.

"So many great snogging spots down there and you want to go look at robes. And they call us Ravenclaws boring. Honestly, Cho. What higher power did you offend to get stuck with this one?"

Harry sneered jokingly back at him.

"Trust me, Corner. I know all about the snogging spots. Ginny kept trying to talk me into going with her all last year. Said you weren't taking good enough care of her. Shame that she's my best mate's sister. She's got one Hell of a tight arse. Girl's grown up quite nicely."

Marietta Edgecombe finally had gotten angry enough to jump into the conversation. Harry had been making the somewhat chauvinistic comments mostly to bait the little snitch.

"Merlin, Potter. You are such a pig. Go back over and sit with the Gryffindorks where you belong. You have no business being in civilized discussions like we have at this table."

"Marietta, darling. You break my heart. Hasn't anybody ever told you that it's quite rude to sneak into somebody else's conversation?"

The girl blazed with anger as most of her housemates snickered at her. Whatever popularity she had once held within Ravenclaw House had seemingly turned to dust after her betrayal of the DA and Fudge's subsequent admittance that Harry had been telling the truth all along. All she could do about it was rise to her feet dramatically.

"You know, I think I've just lost my appetite."

The sneak stormed out of the Great Hall in a huff. Nobody seemed to sympathize with her at all except for Cho, who gave Harry an annoyed look.

“That wasn’t necessary. You know that she’s one of my friends, Harry...”

“I didn’t start it.”

The Chinese girl nodded and let the whole issue slide at that. Harry figured that she really wasn’t all that close with Marietta at this point either, and had thus only made a brief show of taking up for her. He then noticed Luna Lovegood sitting down at the far end of the table and would have gone over to greet her, but the morning papers chose that moment to arrive. Harry absentmindedly resolved to start up a subscription to the Daily Prophet, just so that he wouldn’t have to keep borrowing from everybody else.

The front page article detailed Fudge’s visit to Hogwarts, as expected. The main photograph was of Harry shaking hands with the Minister out on the grounds. Cho was also in the picture, Harry’s other arm wrapped around her waist. He hadn’t seen the photo being snapped the previous day, but hadn’t really been paying much attention either. Harry’s comments were also featured, along with those of Fudge and some of his lead cronies on the inspection team. Thankfully, Harry’s words hadn’t been twisted or modified in any way. The tone of that particular piece of journalism was centered on praising the Minister’s efforts and bringing notice to his newfound friendship with the wizarding world’s young hero. Thus, the typical shots at the old man were largely absent. Some of the interior articles might have taken a more venomous tone, but Harry didn’t bother to read them. He instead rose to leave for McGonagall’s class, getting a quick kiss from one of his two distinct significant others on his way out. Upon reaching the Transfiguration classroom, Harry quickly took a seat near the back. Hermione came in a moment later and took the seat immediately to his right.

“Why weren’t you sitting with us at breakfast, Harry?”

“None of you were in there when I arrived. Besides, it doesn’t hurt to make a few friends in other houses.”

“That’s true. I can’t help but wonder what exactly we’ll be doing in here this term. I know that Dumbledore has instructed the entire staff to focus their upper level curricula entirely upon related dueling techniques. You wouldn’t believe some of the things that can be done with Transfiguration in combat. Oh, and by the way...you’re out of school uniform, Harry.”

“I prefer to think of it as showing my appreciation for other cultures.”

A gratingly familiar drawl answered him.

“Well, I prefer to think that you look like a bloody idiot. Been showing off for your little chink girlfriend, Potter?”

Harry didn’t even bother turning to look at the ferret. Draco couldn’t possibly damage him, even if he somehow managed to get a spell off without Harry or somebody else in the class taking him out first. After the encounter on the train, the young dakaathi hybrid considered himself to be far above needing to treat a suckling like this little rodent as any sort of actual threat.

“You’re in this class, Malfoy? I find it rather surprising that you actually earned the required marks. After all, it would be rather difficult for your father to have bribed the examiners from Azkaban. Perhaps your mother whored herself out to them instead...”

The shots at the boy’s parents had the typical effect. Draco reached into his robes for his wand. Harry still hadn’t even deigned to cast him a glance, but another new arrival interjected into the situation.

“Put the bloody wand down, Malfoy. He’s just going to beat your arse...again. Haven’t you made our house look bad enough already?”

“Stuff it, Zabini. This is none of your concern.”

“Fine. Get sent to the Hospital Wing, then. I couldn’t care less. Looking around, I doubt that Potter would even need bother fighting.”

Harry inclined his head over towards the class, more out of curiosity than anything else. Hermione’s wand and nearly a dozen or so others

belonging to various members of all four houses were trained singularly upon the platinum-haired Slytherin. Given that he had no potential support within the room, Draco was left with little choice but to back down. He stalked angrily over to the other end of the room and took a seat as far away from everybody else in the class as possible. Harry instead gave his attention to Blaise, who took the seat to his other side, rather indiscreetly sliding the desk up against his and leaning over onto him. Her more than ample breasts found themselves nestled snugly against his shoulder, the bone jutting into her cleavage from underneath her robes. Her two counterparts were likewise sitting in a pair of desks in front of them, both looking at him. Blaise spoke to him in a flirtatious cooing voice. It took almost all of his restraint not to throw her on the desk and fuck her right in front of the entire class.

“You've been avoiding us lately, Harry. You haven't spoken a word to us at all since the train...”

He hadn't intended to forget about them, though he could see where the idea came from. He noticed Hermione scowling at the three seductive Slytherins from the corner of his eye. Before he could get a word in edgewise, Professor McGonagall entered the room carrying what looked to be an ornate bowl filled with a strange substance. Harry felt a certain power radiating from it. He had no idea what it had to do with the course material, but he couldn't help but feel that this was going to be a most eventful lesson.

(End Chapter Fifteen)

Author's Note: I got this one out more or less on the schedule that I had hoped for. Some really mild physical stuff for the Harry/Cho people. I didn't really think I even needed to bother with the warning, but I'd much rather err on the side of caution. This chapter didn't seem to flow together as well as I would have liked, and it was paced rather slowly. Still, it got some things accomplished, especially on the relationship front. Since my shipping will actually factor heavily into other things later, it's important for it to be done properly. Now, I'm going to try and answer a few of the more common concerns that I've been hearing lately.

Zharrghast: Yes, I know that a lot of people think that his presence overcomplicates things. I might agree if I were reading the story. However, he is going to play an important role late in the plot, so he's there for a reason. As to whether or not he'll ever get control of our hero, you'll all just have to wait and see.

Albus: Harry won't be killing the old man, at least within the currently planned scenario. That's not to say that he isn't going to die. He might and he might not, but it won't be Harry sticking the proverbial knife into his back. I like Albus Dumbledore as a character, despite the way Harry views him in this fiction. If he meets his end later on, it will be in a fashion worthy of his heroic character.

Flying: I haven't made Harry able to soar because his wings were never really meant for it. They serve a decorative purpose and are a standing symbol of his dakaathi heritage. The wings aren't physically powerful enough to hold his comparatively hefty form aloft. Remember that he has the overall build and thick bone structure of a human being.

I have a new story out that I hope some of you will take a look at. Next chapter for that should be up later this week sometime. Until the next update, everybody. Don't forget to review, I really appreciate it.

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Chapter Seventeen: Copa Anima - Pain and Pleasure Mixed

Warning: This chapter contains some mild sexual content. Nothing explicit, nothing sufficient to warrant an NC-17 rating. However, for anybody who is offended by that sort of stuff, this is your warning to turn back now.

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry watched with an abnormally keen level of interest as his Head of House gently placed the bowl on her desk and turned to regard the class.

“Good morning, students. The fact that you are here indicates that each of you have earned a score of Exceeds Expectations or higher on your Transfiguration OWL. Congratulations to you all. However, the real test begins today...”

Despite his honest effort, Harry found himself unable to concentrate on McGonagall's lecture, due entirely to the buxom distraction situated most comfortably close to him. He closed his eyes for a second as Blaise moved closer to him, causing her twin globes to slide down his arm and come to a stop just above his elbow. Her satin school robes were thinner than most nightgowns, and he imagined that they had to be charmed to be opaque. And she wasn't wearing a bra. His eyes fluttered back open and he gasped slightly, now aware of the girl's head resting gingerly on his shoulder. Several of the male students in the class were sending him jealous glares, and Hermione looked to be mere microseconds from exploding. McGonagall beat her to it.

“...If Miss Zabini would please be so kind as to desist in blatant molestation of Mister Potter, perhaps we might be able to begin with the lesson!”

Blaise rolled her eyes and detached herself from Harry with a visible pout, though she remained close enough that he could feel her body heat. He wondered how in the world she had ever been sorted into Slytherin. Still, there was obviously more to her than the flirtatious attitude that she presented. And regardless, Pansy Parkinson was far more shameless than Blaise. At least the far prettier girl could choose a suitable target for her attentions.

“Whatever, no need to be such a prude about it...”

“Twenty points from Slytherin, Miss Zabini. And ten from Gryffindor, Potter. I should expect proper classroom etiquette from NEWT-level students. Now, as I was trying to say before being so rudely interrupted, the Headmaster has instructed the staff to devote its

undivided attention to teaching defense techniques, in light of the dangers lurking outside of these walls...”

Harry could almost feel Malfoy’s superior smirk despite being unable to see his face. McGonagall continued before he could make some inane comment.

“...And before I continue, I would like to ask whether or not anybody in the class can identify this bowl and its contents, as well as their use.”

Harry had no clue, naturally. He had no time to waste on reading about a bunch of esoteric artifacts, though he couldn’t deny that he was curious about it. A quick glance at Hermione revealed that she was equally stumped. Seeing no response forthcoming, the severe instructor answered her own question.

“Very well, then. This is the Copa Anima, a dish filled with the composite physical essence of every living creature, magical or otherwise, presently known to wizardkind. It allows one with magical blood to make a sort of mental connection with their potential Animagus form, should he or she have one...”

Hermione’s hand went into the air, to the amazement of nobody in the room.

“Professor, is it even possible for somebody to have a magical creature as their Animagus form?”

“Yes, Miss Granger, though it is very uncommon. You see, the Animagus form is decided by a sort of sympathetic link between the wizard and the animal. That is why you will often invariably find that the creature form has certain traits that could be attributed to the person behind it...”

Harry immediately thought of Peter Pettigrew and nodded to himself.

“...However, the form requires a certain level of magical energy to create and maintain. Since normal fauna have little to no magic in their blood, with the noted exception of the owl, the wizard needs only

a marginal level of power in order to make the transformation. Magical creatures are quite the opposite. Their blood is composed of nearly pure magic and thus only a considerably powerful wizard would be able to potentially make the transformation. Aside from that, magical creatures are notoriously fickle in their sympathies. As you might imagine, the odds of a wizard having enough inherent traits in common with a magical creature to forge the required link and also being powerful enough to initiate the change are very small. There has not been a magical creature Animagus in centuries. Are there any other questions?"

Terry Boot had one.

"So, any magical person can theoretically become an Animagus, then? It has nothing to do with actual power?"

Professor McGonagall smiled slightly.

"That is correct, Mister Boot, as long as the wizard is able to focus his magical core sufficiently to initiate the transformation. However, to do just that requires extensive mental training, and not just anybody can muster the level of awareness necessary to complete it. Every wizard has a potential Animagus form. In some cases, one can have too much magical power. This is why you will note that the Headmaster is not an Animagus, and neither is the Dark Lord to the best of our knowledge. Simply put, their potential animal forms, whatever they may be, are not sturdy enough to house their enormous magical energy. While perhaps literally able to undergo the process, they would do so at the very real risk of their own physical destruction."

That made some level of sense to Harry, as he wondered if he was also too powerful to maintain a standard animal form. It couldn't hurt to at least look and see what his form might be, though. McGonagall proceeded to explain that each student in the class would come up to the front of the room and look into the dish, and that everybody would attempt to begin working on the Animagus transformation for the next month. After that, those that had the talent to complete the process would focus on doing so, while the rest would begin working through a rigorous curriculum of dueling transfigurations. Animagus or otherwise, everybody in the class would be running on all cylinders.

Malfoy was the first to be called up, sitting in a front corner of the classroom. He dish seemed to emanate with a strange red glow as he peered down into the liquid. After a few moments he stalked back to his desk, his pointed face burning crimson with rage. He had obviously taken offense to whatever he had seen reflected in the Copa Anima. Other students were called up in turn, while Harry absently chatted with Hermione about the potential uses of the Animagus transformation. As soon as McGonagall became visibly engrossed in the process, Blaise sidled up into Harry again, effectively diverting his attention. He turned to regard the delicious Slytherin with a lazy grin.

“Making yourself comfortable, are you?”

“I don’t see any reason not to. Besides, I don’t hear you complaining too loudly.”

She nestled herself into him a bit tighter. Hermione had her eyes closed and seemed to be doing everything in her power not to cause a scene during class. Harry had no doubts that had been out in the corridor or anywhere but in the middle of a lesson, the Muggleborn witch would already be engaged in a full fit of righteous fervor. He sincerely hoped that her anger stemmed from indignation rather than jealousy. Harry really did not want Hermione to have any sort of crush on him. He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Calm down, Hermione. It’s not a big deal.”

Hermione’s cinnamon brown eyes snapped open and glared at Harry. She spoke in a soft tone, but one that conveyed every bit of the anger that she was feeling. He couldn’t help but be reminded of Professor Snape.

“Of course it’s a big deal! You already have a steady girlfriend, Harry! You shouldn’t just be letting that little succubus work her wiles on you! It’s completely shameless!”

Blaise’s soft coo answered Hermione, the former leaning against Harry’s shoulder again.

“Are you jealous, Granger? You’ve had what, over five years to make a move?”

“Harry is my friend, you indecent hussy!”

“Then what’s your problem? I swear, I don’t carry disease or anything.”

“Go and tell that to his girlfriend, Zabini!”

Harry just leaned back and let them have it out. As long as they didn’t start physically fighting or talking loud enough to bring down the Wrath of Minerva, he could quite happily enjoy the show. He supposed it was rather crass of him to derive pleasure out of two girls fighting over him, even if one wasn’t doing so out of any romantic interest. Some of the other members of the class were willing spectators as well, though McGonagall remained busy observing students at the front and taking notes. Tracey and Daphne both seemed poised to jump on Hermione, and Malfoy was glaring daggers at Harry. The roll invariably reached the rear row of the classroom, and McGonagall’s voice again rang out.

“Zabini, come up to the front now, please.”

Blaise rose to her feet with an almost catlike grace. She made to head up to the front as requested, but instead put her hands on either side of Harry’s head, pulling the taller boy upright and kissing him full on the lips. He cocked an eyebrow as she moved her mouth around on his, capturing his chin and nose, as well as parts of his cheeks in the process. She finally let him go, visibly licking across his mouth as they parted. Harry felt, for lack of a better term, sticky as she sauntered up to a scandalized and sputtering Professor McGonagall. Blaise had obviously been wearing lip gloss, and she had left it all over him. He received some muffled cheers from some of the other boys, and both of Blaise’s two friends looked positively smug. Hermione shot him a scathing look, to which he simply responded with a shrug. It wasn’t as if he had initiated any of it, though he couldn’t deny that he had enjoyed it. She huffed and rather abrasively wiped the mess from his face with a spare piece of parchment.

“Honestly, Harry! You can be such a male sometimes! You’re just as bad as Ron!”

Harry glanced over to the front of the room and saw that Blaise was just finishing up at the bowl and was talking to McGonagall. Knowing that he was due to go up next, he decided to leave Hermione with a parting shot.

“I would think that my being more like Ron would make you disposed to liking me even better...”

Hermione blushed crimson and opened her mouth to retort, but was cut off by the instructor.

“Potter, you’re up.”

Harry stood up and winked at Hermione before trudging up to the front of the room. He winced slightly when Blaise indulgently grabbed his rear when they passed by one another. Malfoy stared hard at him as he reached the front, though Harry completely ignored the boy. McGonagall smiled at him as he reached her position. He looked down into the Copa Anima. The liquid was almost like blood, except that it had a somewhat translucent quality.

“Looks quite appetizing...”

“You know, Potter, were I not so eager to see what exactly your form will be, I just might have kicked you out of the classroom for that little episode with Miss Zabini.”

“She is rather forceful, isn’t she? Though I do pity her in the event that my girlfriend should somehow come to hear of it. And myself as well, mind. That Chinese temper can be quite dreadful.”

“Indeed. I trust that your relationship with Miss Chang won’t impair your performance during Gryffindor’s opening match against Ravenclaw, Potter?”

“Perish the thought, Professor McGonagall.”

“That’s what I want to hear. I’ve become quite attached to having that trophy in my office. Now, concentrate and look down into the dish.”

Harry complied, focusing his magical energy and gazing pointedly down into the Copa Anima. The clear bloody liquid hissed and boiled as he stood there. He could almost feel a presence clawing at his mind, attempting to draw out the animal within. But nothing appeared in the bowl. He knew roughly how long the process should take from absentmindedly observing the other students, and he was overdue for an answer. The liquid started to glow as he forced more of his power outward, trying to forge a connection from his end as well. At last he saw a misty outline of a great bird soaring ominously through the heavens. No other features were discernible. Harry was forced to break off the connection, as the liquid within the bowl was becoming increasingly volatile and he had no desire to cause an explosion.

“Well, what did you see?”

Harry might have been tempted to lie and thus avoid letting his Head of House know about the entire affair, but found his mind a bit too muddled after the strain to really consider it.

“I’m not entirely sure. An outline of some bird, but nothing really solid.”

McGonagall frowned.

“That shouldn’t be possible. The Copa Anima contains the essence of every known creature, extinct or otherwise, that magical society has ever known of. No matter what your form is, it by all means should have been reflected in the bowl.”

Privately, Harry had the idea that perhaps his form didn’t exist in the human realm. He had demonic blood flowing through him, so it was very possible that his animal counterpart could be found in that plane of existence. He would thumb through his ancestor’s demonology tomes when he had the time and inclination. He couldn’t just speak of this to McGonagall, though. His dakaathi heritage was not something that he wanted the old man to find out about.

“Perhaps there’s something out there that hasn’t been discovered?”

“Doubtful, but still possible. Allow me some time to look into the matter further. Perhaps the Headmaster will have some helpful insight concerning the subject. We’ll discuss it during our next class session. You may return to your seat.”

Harry nodded and returned to his seat, as Hermione was called up to the front of the class to replace him. She would be the last student to look into the bowl. Harry had a splitting headache from his own encounter with the artifact. Needless to say, he was no longer in the mood to humor Blaise, though she still happily slid right onto him as soon as he retook his place at the back of the room. He didn’t really mind the contact, but he could just as easily do without it.

“Are you okay, Harry? You aren’t looking so hot.”

“Headache...”

“Poor baby. Here, let me make it better...”

The next thing Harry knew, his head was resting upon Blaise’s bust. Warm and soft as the rather large makeshift cushions were, they did make him feel slightly better. He just lay there as Hermione retook her seat, almost being able to sense her glare upon both himself and Blaise, and tuned out the rest of McGonagall’s lecture. He could get the homework assignment from somebody else later. Soon enough, she dismissed the class and Harry was practically dragged to his feet by Hermione.

“What are you doing, ‘Mione?”

“Getting you away from this vixen before she tempts you into doing something you’ll regret.”

Harry simply allowed himself to be led away, not really having the energy to protest. Hermione was of course unaware of how much he had already done with Blaise Zabini, and with her two friends as well. And he hadn’t regretted it in the slightest then. Quite the opposite, he

still had aims on finishing their little tryst when the opportunity presented itself. But for the moment, all that he was looking forward to was a decent nap. The Slytherin beauty took his other hand, halting him in his tracks. She came up close to him again, whispering into his ear.

“Before you go, Harry, I just want you to know something. I like you a lot, and I want you all for myself. I don’t care a single bit that you have a girlfriend already. I’m not afraid of a challenge, and I’ve tangled with rivals far more lethal than that pampered little Ravenclaw princess. I don’t back down from even the nastiest of Slytherin girls. I stole a seventh year’s boyfriend when I was in third, and I wasn’t even all that interested in him.”

Harry only shook his head with amusement despite the pain. If Blaise thought that she was going to just steal him away for herself, Cho was only the lesser half of her concerns, the other being a trained assassin who would have no compunction about cutting the Slytherin’s throat. Besides, nothing of the sort was going to happen. Blaise was extremely hot and dynamite in the sack, but Harry honestly had no deeper feelings for her.

“I’ll...keep that in mind, Blaise.”

“You do that. Catch you around.”

Blaise kissed Harry on the cheek and left the classroom, followed by Daphne and Tracey. The other two girls also smiled sweetly at him upon passing by. Harry glanced over to Hermione, whose anger had yet to subside.

“I think I’m going to head back up to the Tower. I need a nap.”

“I’m going up to the library for a few hours. I have History of Magic this afternoon and I want to review my summer notes.”

“Maybe I should go with you. I’ll get a much better sleep with bloody Binns than I ever would in the dorms...”

“Language, Potter.”

Harry snorted.

“You sound too much like Cho. See you at dinner, Hermione.”

With that, Harry turned and left for his waiting four poster, and fell into a lucid sleep.

Late that Friday evening, Harry emerged from the Whomping Willow passageway inside the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. He had tentatively promised to make a visit to Hitomi's new place down in the village and was going to make good on it. Ironically, he enlisted one of the people that he would least want to know of his reasons for the trip to provide his cover story. According to the official story, he had stayed up late tutoring Cho in advanced defense techniques and had fallen asleep on her couch in the Head Girl's private dormitory. He had told her that he would be attending to some business that required him to leave the castle. Cho had seemingly accepted the story at face value, pleased that he had trusted her to run interference for him, as opposed to Ron or one of the other Weasleys. They had also made arrangements to meet up in the Room of Requirement tomorrow afternoon finally discuss the formation of Harry's battle unit.

Though McGonagall's lesson had been his most interesting classroom experience of the week, the others weren't far behind. Looking back, Harry had to admit that he had erred somewhat in estimating that continuing his studies at Hogwarts would be a complete waste of time. Even Moody's introductory lecture was an adventure. The terminally paranoid ex-Auror periodically fired hexes at random students as he spoke in his growling voice. Nothing more dangerous than light Stunners, but the instructor read the proverbial Riot Act to anybody who was caught unprepared and hit. Knowing to expect the unexpected from Moody, Harry had been wearing his armor and the Banishing Spell sent his way early into the lesson bounced away harmlessly after hitting his left bracer. At the end of the class, he had given each student a slip of parchment with instructions on where to report for the next week's lesson, charmed so that the information could not be shared with classmates, a mild variation of the Fidelius Charm.

His Muggle weapons training course was likewise eventful. The instructor was Professor Bashilov, the large Slavic man who Harry could absently recall being somewhat less than impressed with him during that first morning meal back at the castle. The behemoth apparently took a somewhat Snapiian view of Harry, in that he saw him as a spoiled media prince who played at being a man. When they walked into the class, he was brandishing a huge double-ended battle-ax. The first order of business had been to have each student choose a weapon to work with. The weapons rack only had heavy European weapons to choose from, so Harry chose a standard long sword. He could adapt whatever he learned to his kodachi with little trouble, or he could simply have a larger sword forged for him if necessary. Ron, who was also in the class, chose a heavy ball and chain. The rest of the lesson had been devoted to a grueling physical exercise regimen, to build strength and stamina for future training. Bashilov had been given Harry grudging praise for being one of the very few with anything left at the end.

The only other item worth noting was Quidditch. Harry had made significantly more progress at the Chaser position with a live Keeper to practice against, though Ron could hardly be described as being at his best in the early morning. The extra drilling improved the redhead's play also, and Gryffindor team's goaltending was beginning to change from a glaring weakness to a marginal strength. The twins also revealed a set of slightly charred, but still very usable racing brooms at the team meeting, spoils from the battle on the train. Apparently while most of the student body was listening to Harry chew out Dumbledore's hide at the front, Fred and George remained at the rear and took the opportunity to nick the fallen Death Eaters' broomsticks. With the twins back on the team, a blossoming Keeper, a lesser loss of talent in the Chaser line than anticipated, and a new set of brooms acquired at the Dark Lord's personal expense, Gryffindor's continued domination on the pitch seemed to be assured.

But such thoughts were far from Harry's mind as he stepped into the central square of Hogsmeade. Charmed lampposts added only dim illumination to the area in the dead of night. There was but one main road of egress, branching off in the direction of Hogwarts. A smattering of wizards and witches milled about, mostly coming to and from The Three Broomsticks pub. This was where Voldemort would

be coming to await him on Halloween. Harry couldn't even fathom the Dark Lord's thinking, waltzing right into enemy territory on a gamble. Of course, the smart odds were that the entire letter was a ruse meant to lure Harry into an ambush. Or at least, it could easily become one should he refuse Voldemort's offer. This would be an ideal place for such a stratagem, with only a few potential routes to escape through. Voldemort had nothing to lose in this endeavor, really. He could always signal a withdrawal if Harry saw through the ploy and brought along a powerful escort. The most prudent move would be just to ignore the letter, perhaps letting either the Ministry or the old man know so that Hogsmeade would be properly secured that night.

But as Harry mulled the thought over, leaning against a sign in front of a closed shop, a more daring idea came to him. It would be ridiculously risky, but the potential payoff was equally great. It was a trap, and he knew that it was a trap, but perhaps he could thwart it armed with that knowledge. If he could turn Voldemort's own plot against him and kill the serpentine wizard, it would end the first phase of his overall scheme, which was routing the Dark Lord and his army, without an ounce of bloodshed. After all, the best way to kill a snake was to lop off the head. He would then have his entire army completely intact and still hidden from general knowledge, leaving him free to plan his next move. The only issue was whether or not he was actually powerful enough to take Voldemort head on. He had nearly lost his life against Bellatrix on the train, after all.

But all those details could be ironed out later on. Noticing a number of Japanese characters in front of a nearby shop, Harry resumed his trek. The door was unlocked. He was apparently expected. He took a moment to admire some of the patterns on display. They were nice, but he liked his own collection of exotic robes better. They had certainly remodeled the place quickly enough. The interior was strikingly similar to that of Kenzo's home back in the village. He had not often seen any of the Shinn Kohaku doing magic in the traditional sense, so the work likely hadn't been done that way.

Harry prowled up the stairs, making every attempt to keep himself concealed. He doubted that he would actually be able to sneak up on the establishment's two occupants, but it would be good practice

nonetheless. He didn't make it very far. The room immediately across from the stairway was Kenzo's. The old village leader was sitting on his futon, reading by candlelight. His head snapped up the moment that Harry was able to see him. The elderly Japanese man just pointed with his thumb to a room down the hall with a wry grin. Harry returned it with a nod and went on his way. Quite an understanding fellow Kenzo was.

[Content removed]

"You really should just move in with us, you know. Grandpa wouldn't mind."

"Speaking of whom, I hope we didn't keep him up too late last night..."

"Oh, don't worry about him. He has over seventy years in the clan behind him. Sleepless nights are a common thing for him."

They kept up the small talk during their bath. She made him wait as she dressed, and went downstairs to get him a spare robe from the shop. Once he was dressed, she sent him down the hall into the small kitchen to chat with her grandfather while she cleaned up their bedroom. Kenzo had cooked, a full breakfast of sausage, eggs, and hash browns. Hitomi may not have taken well to greasy Western food, but the old village leader had no such difficulties. Harry expressed his thanks and loaded up a plate.

"I believe that I should say welcome home, young lord."

"Certainly feels more like it than that drafty old castle."

"Indeed. Hitomi complains about the school constantly. Though it was her idea to apply for a teaching position."

"Did you agree with her decision?"

"I did, in as much that it would be of use to have an operative within the school faculty."

"Perhaps, but I worry about the old man finding her out."

Kenzo nodded in the negative.

“Do not concern yourself. She is very skilled at keeping her cover.”

At that point, Hitomi came into the room with Harry’s things bound into a tight bundle. She handed over his masterpiece wand and set the rest on the kitchen table, taking a seat next to Harry and leaning up against him. That surprised him somewhat. During the month at the village, she had always been very reserved about showing him any affection in front of her grandfather. It was almost as if being intimate in front of her only family was a line that she wasn’t yet ready to cross then. She wrinkled her brow at the sight of the heavy English meal on the table.

“Grandpa! I’ve told you a hundred times not to eat this sludge. It’s bad for your heart.”

“I am an old man, Hitomi, and I will eat whatever I like.”

“But it tastes so horrible...”

“To you, perhaps. My apologies, you must have quite an appetite after last night’s exercise.”

Harry conveniently tuned out the resulting banter, and they both noticed.

“Don’t let him bother you, Harry. He’s just a perverted old goat.”

“Yes, an old goat that wants a full load of great-grandchildren to spoil in his declining years. Neither of you have anything to be embarrassed about.”

Harry laughed loudly despite himself. During his time in the village, their attitude at the table and elsewhere had always seemed so stiff and formal, as if they had felt some obligation to show complete decorum for a guest in their home. Maybe this was how they acted alone, and the fact that they did so in front of him meant that they regarded him more as family than as an outsider. It felt rather nice.

He looked out the window and noticed a lot of small bodies milling about the Hogwarts grounds in the distance. He then glanced over at a clock on the wall. It was nearing time for lunch at the school. He had to get back before people started getting suspicious.

"I've really enjoyed visiting here, but I really need to get back up to the castle. I'm only out of bounds on a shaky alibi as it is."

Kenzo smiled.

"Understood. But please do come and visit us as often as you can. My poor granddaughter is always beside herself without you around."

Harry shook his head with amusement.

"I certainly will. Take care, both of you."

He rose to leave, and Hitomi followed him downstairs. The shop was still closed, and a few customers were waiting outside. She leaned in and whispered something into his ear as he opened the front door.

"One last thing, Harry. You'll have to tell me all about that girl from last week's newspapers the next time you visit."

(End Chapter Seventeen)

Author's Note: Well, not the best chapter I've done, but at least Harry's weekly routine is mostly set. Things will start moving a bit faster here directly. I couldn't get much action into this chapter, but I'll have some in the next. Serious battle scenes like the one on the train will be few and far between, but allow me to guarantee that the things I have planned for Halloween will make the wait worthwhile.

I might have had a few other things to comment on here, but I'm honestly too tired. I have this terrible habit of finishing chapters late at night. Later everybody, and don't forget to review.

And a few extra notes, now that I'm awake and recharged myself. First, I can already see that some people are getting averse to all the sex. Honestly, so am I. However, there has been a reason behind all

of it. The scenes earlier in the work were to sort of develop Harry as a character and let him sow his oats, so to speak. The last two were to bring some final definition to what each of his two chosen mates mean to him. I'll leave it to you to figure out what that means, but I think I've made it obvious enough. Now that I've finished with that, there won't be much more of the raunchy stuff for a good while, as I'm going to back off the romantic front for the most part and plunge fully into preparing Harry's forces and getting him personally ready for the coming ordeal on Halloween night. That has been the plan all along, so those of you that are getting averse to his screwing around all the time, have no fear.

Second, Harry's Animagus form, if I choose to have him develop one, will not, and I repeat, WILL NOT be any sort of Phoenix. That has to be one of the most overused plot devices in existence, and I absolutely refuse to employ it. Hope this helps those of you who have yet to read the chapter. I have an idea in mind that I think most of you will enjoy.

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Chapter Eighteen: Trees and Acorns – Plotting the Great Strategy

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry smiled sheepishly, knowing that the game was up. At least, he could be thankful that the far less vindictive of the two females had been the one to catch him. He found some humor in the fact that he could stand down a horde of crazed dark wizards without batting an eyelash, but was abjectly terrified of the current circumstances.

“I’ll be sure to do that. And I still owe your grandfather that story about the battle on the train. We can dedicate an entire day to catching up on things.”

“That sounds fun. But you look so nervous, my love. Relax, it’s not like I’m going to garrote you or anything.”

Harry blinked, his unease slowly drifting away. He was still cautious enough to choose his words carefully.

“Right...so, about that girl...she’s...”

“Next visit, Harry. I’d rather hear about it when you’re not sweating bullets.”

“Then I’d better be going. See you next week, Hitomi.”

She just nodded and kissed him before starting back upstairs, apparently in no mood to open up the shop and do any actual work. She didn’t seem at all angry about Cho. It was almost as if she had expected something like this to happen. Harry didn’t know exactly how he felt about that. Then again, she could just be trying to lull him into a false sense of security. He started for the door, keeping his

mind's eye on a sharp lookout, just in case she launched a kunai or something at him from behind. Naturally, nothing of the sort happened, but she did hail him from the middle of the steps as his hand was on the doorknob.

"Oh, and Harry? One last thing..."

He turned his head back to regard her. She had a hand on her hip and a mock stern expression on her face. He just allowed her to continue.

"...Detention. For being in Hogsmeade without official permission."

Harry smirked. At least he wouldn't have to try and be intentionally late to her class again.

"Understood, professor."

"You'll get all the details after class on Monday. Now get back to the castle before people start asking questions."

Harry turned and left the shop with a laugh. He didn't get too many odd looks from the assorted Hogsmeade denizens going about their business outside. His still drying hair mostly obscured his scar. A few of the town's residents were dressed in Japanese robes. The style was seemingly catching on everywhere, and he expected to see his clothing of choice scattered about much of the castle after the first scheduled Hogsmeade trip. Intent as he was on reaching the castle, he stopped upon passing by The Three Broomsticks. Looking through the front window of the local pub and eatery, he could clearly see a familiar red ponytail, accompanied by an also familiar silvery wave. He couldn't resist the urge to drop in on Bill's lunch date with Fleur. With that thought in mind, he entered the busy tavern, ostensibly to pick up a case of Butterbeer. Bill immediately noticed his presence, though Harry walked right by him and up to the bar, where the lovely Madam Rosmerta greeted him with a chiding tone.

"You're supposed to be up in the castle, Mister Potter. There's not a Hogsmeade weekend scheduled for nearly a month."

“I was headed back, but I just couldn’t resist the urge to drop in and say hello.”

The older woman laughed, causing her sizable breasts to jiggle. Harry briefly wondered if Rosmerta was Blaise Zabini’s estranged aunt or some facsimile. They certainly had a few features in common. She placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“I hope that’s not all you came for, little Harry. I must say, you’ve grown quite attractive these last few years. More so than your father ever was. It’s quite a shame I’m not a few years younger, or else I’d have been on top of you already...”

Despite his usual control over his emotional reactions, Harry flushed at hearing this. Madam Rosmerta was the forbidden sex fantasy of every single horny pubescent wizard to grace the hallowed halls of Hogwarts in more than a quarter century, and she was coming on to him without any veneer of propriety. Damned if that dakaathi charm wasn’t some potent stuff. The woman’s scent literally assaulted him, a sweet and undeniably sexy mixture of perfume and Butterbeer, along with a dominant female musk. Even in her fifties, the barmaid was a sight to behold. Harry found himself stammering like a child.

“Well...if you really want to do something for me...”

The mature beauty leaned in closer, crooning into his ear. Her breath was like liquid fire pouring into him.

“Speak up, sugar. Tell me exactly what you want.”

In his peripheral vision, Harry noticed Bill trying his damndest not to laugh at him. Fleur, on the other hand, seemed somewhat annoyed. This brief distraction was enough to allow him to regain his composure. Tempted though he was to take the woman up on her rather blatant offer, it would definitely be bad if it were to reach the public’s ears.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d sell me a few cases of Butterbeer. We really need to restock our supply up in the dorms, and Snape’s been hovering around the kitchens at night.”

Rosmerta flashed Harry an appreciative smile.

“Well, that’s easy. Take a seat and have a mug or two on the house. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

The barmaid turned and flounced to the back, giving Harry a full view of her rear. Father Time had been most gentle with her. Harry stalked over to Bill’s table, a faint blush still suffusing his cheeks. The eldest Weasley son had already pulled out a chair for him, between himself and his girlfriend. The youngest member of the trio took in the amused look on the redhead’s face with a scowl.

“Not a single word, Bill. I mean it.”

And of course, the latter made his comment.

“Merlin, Harry. You’re looking a wee bit flushed. Too hot for you in here?”

“Only because of your girlfriend, naturally. Fleur, let’s dump this ponytailed loser and go take a dip in the lake. It’d be just like the Second Task, except with no hostages and hopefully much less clothing.”

Fleur laughed airily and smiled at Harry, daintily wagging a finger.

“‘Zat water is filthy, ‘Arry. ‘Zough I would not mind taking a swim wiz’ you under o’zer circumstances.”

Harry smirked, resolving to annoy Bill by flirting with the beautiful part-veela for as long as possible. She seemed to catch onto his game, and willingly participated.

“That’s good to hear. I’ll need to look into having a pool installed at Headquarters.”

“Do ‘zat, and I will teach you ‘ze breaststroke, among o’zer ‘zings.”

“I’ve already been taught everything that I hope you were thinking of teaching me, but I could always use the extra practice.”

Bill took the entire exchange in good humor, apparently trusting Harry not to even actually taking any liberties with his girlfriend. Rosmerta returned with a warm mug of Butterbeer for Harry, pressing herself slightly against him as she took their orders for lunch. Harry bought a full meal, despite having just eaten at Kenzo’s new home. His appetite had increased dramatically since his transformation, not to mention all of the energy he had exerted with Hitomi throughout the previous night. Fleur watched the barmaid with that same irritated expression on her face. Bill restarted the conversation once the older woman was gone.

“Tell me, Harry, why exactly are you hanging around Hogsmeade this morning?”

“Just spending some quality time with my admiring public, naturally.”

Bill smirked and Fleur rolled her eyes.

“Right, and I’ll bet that you didn’t spend any time in that new robe shop.”

Harry returned the smirk in kind.

“As a matter of fact, I did. Well, not so much in the store itself, but I did get a rather nice extended tour of one of the upstairs bedrooms.”

“I’ll bet. You must have had quite a time to be able to turn down Madam Rosmerta like that. I don’t think there are many wizards around who would decline a roll in the hay with her, regardless of her age.”

“Hey, I didn’t actually turn her down. Still, having a girlfriend that can sneak into your quarters and gut you without making a single sound does wonders for your resolve.”

Bill laughed heartily, while his girlfriend looked confused.

"I wouldn't know, Harry. Speaking of Hitomi, how's she adjusting to outside life?"

"Well enough, though she absolutely hates British cuisine."

Fleur scoffed and flipped her hair haughtily.

"What you Eenglish call fine cuisine, we call burnt meat over in France."

That comment drew a few nasty looks from other patrons. The quarter-veela apparently had yet to part with some of her bad habits. Harry only chuckled.

"Indeed. Snails and frogs are much tastier. What brings the two of you out to these distant locales this fine autumn's morning? Surely there are nearer places to have a lunch date."

"You do, actually. Well, you and my brothers and sister. Fleur and I were planning to go up to the castle and drop in on you lot after lunch, but you apparently found us first."

"I see. Now that we're both here, maybe you can give me a few quick status updates. How's Gringotts taking to Fudge's new legislation about Death Eaters' accounts?"

Bill shrugged.

"The President is going along with it, simply because your defined policy is to hurt Voldemort above anything else. We've been seizing the majority of the assets and placing them in our own war chest, though. By the time the Ministry gets around to them, most of the funds will be gone."

Harry nodded his approval.

"I suppose that's as good as we can do with it. I'm not wild about handing Fudge more gold if it does us no benefit, but it's better than snakeface having it."

“That being the case, I seem to recall him jaunting right into the bank a few days ago brandishing a fat check with your signature on it. The goblins got a chuckle out of it. The Order was absolutely furious, though. Dumbledore isn’t at all pleased with your making up with Fudge from behind his back. Slick move, is pretty much what I’m trying to say.”

Harry had figured that the old man wouldn’t be happy with those developments, but Dumbledore hadn’t said anything to him about it. He was obviously unwilling to risk alienating the young wizard any further.

“Why thank you. Is the public biting into the latest Daily Prophet line? Are they singing my praises and cursing the old man’s name?”

“Yes and no. You’re the conquering hero, of course. Everybody’s celebrating you after that entire train fiasco, but they also are very reluctant to condemn Dumbledore. It’s to be expected, though. Almost every witch and wizard alive today has grown up under his wing at Hogwarts. He’s a surrogate grandfather to the entirety of magical Britain. That kind of personal loyalty is going to be very hard to dislodge from their hearts and minds. It would take something much more drastic than a Ministry-sponsored smear campaign.”

Harry filed that thought away, even though ruining Dumbledore didn’t fit within his current prerogatives, at least for the moment. He still needed the old man around until Voldemort was done away with. Lunch was then served, effectively halting the conversation. Harry and Bill both feasted on sirloin steaks, while Fleur only had a salad, keeping to her long standing dislike of British food. Once the meal concluded, the three agreed to go up to the castle together. Harry would have a much easier time worming out of any potential difficulties with the faculty that way, not that he would have actually served any punishment doled out regardless. He was a titled aristocrat and a legal adult. School rules were far beneath his level of regard. Bill paid for their food and strode outside with Fleur while Harry headed back to the bar to purchase his Butterbeer.

“I’ll get that Butterbeer now, if you don’t mind.”

Naturally, he had the barmaid's full attention.

"Of course, sweetheart. I've already got it brought up. Here you go."

"Thanks, how much do I owe you?"

The woman just smiled.

"Don't you worry about that. Tell you what, you promise to come visit me again the next time you're out of the castle, and we'll call it even."

Harry raised an eyebrow. He had more than enough money to pay for the stuff, but wasn't about to complain about the deal.

"Well, that's rather generous. I'll just have to take you up on it."

"Wonderful. You're a pretty interesting young man, you know. Not many can resist my charms, especially at your age. My niece wasn't exaggerating about you."

Harry sneered inwardly, sensing that he had called it perfectly.

"You have a niece at Hogwarts...let me guess, Blaise Zabini?"

Rosmerta giggled and thrust out her expansive chest. Harry felt that she was far too old to be carrying on like a schoolgirl.

"I take it you noticed the resemblance, sugar. Rosmerta Zabini, at your service. Not many people know about my being related to one of the old lines. I've kept it pretty secret. A whole lot of folks around magical Britain are wary of purebloods, so it would have been bad for my business to advertise it. Naturally, I'm Blaise's aunt. I've taught the girl everything she knows about taking care of a boy."

Harry found himself wishing that he had been allowed to sit in on those particular lessons.

"So, how does that have anything to do with me?"

“Let’s just say that Blaise sent me an owl last week asking for advice on enrapturing a certain boy wonder. I just couldn’t believe that you could stave off her advances. Since you happened to come in here today, I thought I’d try my hand and see if she was doing something improperly, or if you were really just that good.”

Harry frowned slightly. Naturally, he had no real intention of pursuing any kind of arrangement with Madam Rosmerta, or with her niece, for that matter. Still, he didn’t like being deceived for her amusement one single bit. After a moment’s reflection, he decided simply to accept it and be relieved that his romantic situation wasn’t becoming even more treacherous than it already was.

“Then all of that was just a joke. Well, I appreciate the drink and I’ll keep to the deal.”

Harry started for the front entrance, doing his best not to show any outward signs of annoyance. Rosmerta placed a hand on his wrist, halting his departure.

“Hold on a sec. I just said that I was curious, not that I was only playing with you. I already told you, you’re a very attractive young man. If you’re interested, come pay me a visit on one of my nights off and I’ll give you the ride of your life, sweetheart. No strings attached, of course.”

Harry smirked at that. Ron and the rest of the dorm would be fit to burst upon hearing this story.

“I wasn’t aware that this place ever closed at night.”

The buxom bartender tossed him a saucy wink.

“I’d close the bar for a solid month in exchange for a night with you, Harry Potter. Just send me an owl in advance so I can get everything ready.”

“I might just do that. I’d better get going now. Have a nice day, Madam Rosmerta.”

“Just call me Rose, sugar. I can’t wait to see you again.”

Harry left with a nod, not having any plans to ever take the woman up on her offer. It promised nothing to him aside from a rather common night of passion, and the potential repercussions were severe should the wrong people ever come to know of it. Bill relieved him of one of the cases of Butterbeer once they met up outside. They headed up the main path to Hogwarts, and Harry told his companions about his most recent exchange with the barmaid. Fleur was positively furious about it, a fact that somewhat unnerved Harry. Perhaps the French part-veela was just devoted and protective of him, and didn’t take well to the other woman tossing herself at him. That would be fine, but the other possibility, that she was attracted to him and was jealous, would not be. Bill didn’t seem particularly concerned, and the redhead knew Fleur much better than Harry did, so the latter opted simply to ignore the matter and hope nothing untoward would come of it.

After a few hours of chatting with the rest of the crew in Gryffindor Tower over a copious volume of chilled Butterbeer, it came time for Harry to head for the Room of Requirement for his arranged meeting with Cho. After tonight, one of his bigger plans would be officially put into motion. He asked Bill to accompany him, feeling that having an informed outside opinion on the matters to be discussed would be of use. Fleur followed along as well, having no desire to be left in a dormitory full of ogling males without her boyfriend, and Ron brought up the rear, unwilling to be left out. Cho was there when they arrived, and had already willed the enchanted room to be decorated to her specifications. It had a decidedly Chinese look, and Harry found it to be strikingly similar to the lounge in her family’s complex in Liangshan Alley, where he had first conversed with her father. The major difference was that all of the furniture and trappings were in royal blue and bronze, the colors of Ravenclaw House. Bill was the first to comment.

“This decor is very...Ravenclaw.”

Cho turned around, raising her eyebrows a bit at the fact that Harry had brought an entourage. He scanned the room for any kinds of Listening Charms, finding none. Apparently, Dumbledore was morally righteous and trusting enough not to bug the school or spy on the

students. Either that or he was just too oblivious to consider that people might be plotting against him right under his overlarge nose.

“Of course. Only the best, though I should apologize for not making room for extras. I was expecting just Harry. You’re obviously a Weasley, but I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you before.”

“That I am. Bill Weasley, and I believe you already know Fleur from the Triwizard Tournament a few years back. Pleasure’s all mine.”

Cho nodded as Harry slipped over to the large sofa on which she was seated and took a seat next to her. Ron sneered upon seeing a large Tornadoes banner on a far wall of the room and manipulated the room’s magic to replace it with a larger one of the Cannons. Harry shook his head at Ron’s antics and draped an arm around Cho’s middle while she and Fleur caught up on things. Apparently the two had formed a loose friendship during Harry’s fourth year, when Fleur was the champion for Beauxbatons. Now that he thought about it, the delegation from the French wizarding school had spent most of its time within Hogwarts in the company of the Ravenclaws. He took a moment to admire the room’s transformation.

“How long did it take to get the room like this, anyway?”

“A few hours. I really had nothing better to do, seeing as a certain useless boyfriend who shall remain nameless left me to hang all day in favor of prancing around Hogsmeade by himself.”

Harry just smiled and nuzzled her raven hair. Bill gave him a look that clearly stated that he was treading in very dangerous waters by having two separate girlfriends. Of course, the eldest Weasley son knew little of the actual dichotomy of the two females, and couldn’t possibly understand Harry’s position.

“I told you, I had some business to attend to.”

“You reek of Butterbeer, Harry. I’m not an idiot.”

Ron came to Harry’s defense on that tidbit.

“We were just drinking up in the dorms after he got back.”

Cho scowled.

“Nobody asked you, Tornado hater!”

Harry rolled his eyes, while Bill and Fleur looked amused by the bickering. The former recalled a similar argument between the two earlier in the week, back when the three students were lounging around on the grounds with the twins. The professional Quidditch hostility between Ron and Cho was going to end up with wands being drawn one of these days. The realization that the Chinese beauty was starting to usurp Hermione’s traditional role as the female foil to Ron and himself came to the forefront of Harry’s mind, accompanied by a powerful wave of regret. He had been trying to keep his distance from the other girl while she worked through her personal issues, but he was starting to miss her. It was at that point that he resolved to risk bringing her into the fold. Surely he and Ron could convince her of the correctness of what they were doing. But there were more pressing matters to attend to at the moment. Cho had just baited Ron into placing an extremely foolish fifty Galleon wager on the outcome of the next match between their two respective teams when Harry interrupted their pointless debate.

“As much as I’m enjoying the show, we’re here to discuss something important.”

Cho rounded on Harry next, her fiery Chinese temper roused.

“So it’s just down to business, without so much as a hel...”

Harry sighed and pulled her into a kiss, letting her work out her aggressions in a more physical fashion, and one much more pleasurable for him. He mentally sneered at Ron’s gagging in the background. A minute or so later, a rather placated and breathless Cho broke the contact, leaning her head into a smirking Harry’s chest.

“There, isn’t that much better?”

“Very, but let me warn you, don’t start thinking that you can just do that whenever you get into trouble.”

Harry didn’t have a smart retort ready, but Bill took away the need for one by changing the subject.

“Now that this little quarrel is out of the way, let me suggest that we get serious here. Harry, tell me about this latest grand scheme of yours.”

“It’s hardly my latest, but it’s one of the most important. I want to put together a small army of students within the school. Maybe fifteen or twenty at the most, and I have roughly half of them chosen already. Most of the rest is going to need to come out of Ravenclaw, which is why Cho’s here right now. I’ve had her scouting her housemates for potential during this past week. The rest of you are here because I’d like to ask for outside opinions on how to go about training them.”

Ron piped in first.

“Before we hear about the Ravenclaws, tell us who you have right now. I can’t believe I’m just hearing about this now.”

“I’ve only had it in my head for a week. Anyway, our two main pillars of support will be Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. From our house, you obviously, as well as Ginny and the twins. I assume those are all given. Hopefully Hermione, though that will remain to be seen. I think she can be talked over, but it will have to be done carefully. I’m going to try to get Katie in on this, though I might delegate the twins to securing her help. I’m not so sure about the rest. For starters, I think that Parvati and Lavender are far too immature. Seamus isn’t much of a fighter, and he’s turned his back on me in the past. Dean doesn’t care about any of this very much, though he would probably join up for Ginny’s sake. Neville is loyal, but his ability is suspect. He might be a liability when things get rough.”

“I disagree about Neville, mate. He’s tougher than he looks and acts. I’m with you on the rest, though. If we aren’t going to bring Seamus and Dean in, we at least need to figure out a way to keep them from getting suspicious.”

“We’ll work that out later. Outside of Gryffindor, I’m considering approaching Susan Bones. I want at least one person from every house so we can keep track of what’s happening all over the school. She’s by far the best choice out of the Hufflepuffs in terms of both loyalty and skill, and the fact that her aunt is essentially the top ranking Auror in all of the British Isles is an added bonus. I’m positive that she’d fight against Voldemort and I can probably cajole her into opposing the old man. The only potential sticking point will be whether or not she’ll be willing to stand against the Ministry. I don’t know how friendly Amelia Bones is with Fudge and his stooges.”

This was one issue that Ron knew more about than Harry.

“Not very. I’ve overheard mum and dad saying that Dumbledore’s been trying to recruit Madam Bones into the Order for a while now. She’s flat out refused him thus far, at least to the best of my knowledge. Dad says that she doesn’t want her duty to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to come into conflict with whatever the old man might have her doing. But still, he wouldn’t bother trying to get through to her in the first place if she were a Fudge crony.”

Cho added in a thought.

“But I’d think that’s liable to change now that Fudge is actually doing his job properly and funneling boatloads of Galleons into her department. Since the Ministry’s finally getting onto its feet regarding this entire war, Madam Bones would be likely to support its current leader so as not to cause any internal strife.”

Harry decided to close the Susan issue, wanting to move on.

“At any rate, Susan would be a useful helper to have around as far as getting rid of old snakeface’s minions is concerned. That’s our top priority. After that, there are ways of doing away with Fudge that don’t involve direct war against the government. He’s a pitiful excuse for a wizard, remember. Just having him assassinated is every bit as much a viable option as physically deposing him. For the moment, that blustering fool is a distant nuisance at most, not to mention that we

still need him around to keep things together while we deal with Voldemort.”

“We should get somebody from Slytherin. A small group of them saved our hides back on the train, three hot girls and a few younger ones. We could talk to the Head Boy also. He fought in the battle too, I think.”

Harry nodded slowly, somewhat surprised that Ron would be advocating recruitment from the serpent’s den.

“Those girls were probably Blaise and her friends. I plan on talking to them, but I’m not expecting them to deliver much dirt on happenings in Slytherin. I’d imagine that they’re essentially outcasts after fighting against the Death Eaters. Still, all three of them are reasonably strong witches, and they’ll probably throw their lot in with us given a promise to protect them from retaliation by their housemates.”

Surprisingly, Cho said nothing. Harry more or less knew that she had heard about Blaise’s activities in McGonagall’s class. It had been a hot topic of discussion around the entire school for the following couple of days. Either he had managed to convince her of the strong logic behind keeping the voluptuous Slytherin around, or she was just biding her time until the girl tried to make a move on him in her presence. All she did was postulate that recruiting Adrian Pucey would be impossible, as he couldn’t stand Gryffindors in general and Harry in particular. The background story told, it was then time for her to give her report.

“Now, Cho, if you don’t mind, tell us what we can expect from Ravenclaw.”

The pretty Seeker beamed at finally having her moment.

“Well, Luna Lovegood is the only one with much practical fighting experience. She took part in that whole mess at the Ministry last year, as you all probably know. So she’s the most obvious choice. Michael Corner is pretty talented also, and he’s so smitten with Ginny Weasley that he’ll join up just to be around her...”

Ron's angry muttering threatened to drown Cho out. Harry found it rather laughable. Michael was a decent guy with a good sense of humor, and was probably a better match for Ginny than Dean Thomas, not that he had any intention at all of doing anything to get them back together. He did make a move to quiet his best mate, however.

"Ron, you can plot out your vengeance later. Cho, please continue."

Cho glared at Ron, having finally noticed the Cannons banner on the wall.

"...As I was saying. Terry Boot isn't a bad choice either, but he's not that great of a duelist. Too meek of a personality, really. As for the girls, Su Li is probably the most talented witch in Ravenclaw, period. I'd bet that you didn't even know she exists, so I'll give you a quick rundown on her. She lives in Liangshan Alley like me. Her family is a recent arrival from China, so I didn't know her either until she started Hogwarts. She's studied the traditional arts a lot more extensively than I have, and knows some really nasty stuff. It's a shame she didn't join the D.A. last year. I tried to get her to, but she's extremely shy and doesn't take well to crowds. I'll attempt to talk her over for you, but it might help if you made a personal effort."

This was a pleasant surprise. Harry wasn't really expecting anybody new to be uncovered. His general purpose in delegating Cho to talk over the Ravenclaws was to appease her by giving her something important to do, as well as to take advantage of her popularity to secure people with wavering opinions towards Harry. This entire idea was turning out to be a marked success, at least on paper.

"Is there anybody else worth mentioning, then?"

"Padma Patil is one. She's about the opposite of her twin sister in terms of personality, so maturity shouldn't be an issue. She might also be able to keep Parvati in line should you try to bring both of them in. If you need a few others, Lisa Turpin and Anthony Goldstein are acceptable, but not quite on the same level as the others I've mentioned."

Harry took a moment to tally up when he had to work with, assuming everybody he wanted in agreed to join up with him. Six or seven Gryffindors, including four Weasleys, Hermione, Katie and perhaps Neville, along with a lone Hufflepuff in Susan. He had three Slytherins, those being Blaise, Daphne and Tracey. From Ravenclaw, he had Cho by default, and he could count on Luna coming into the fold, Michael and hopefully this unexpected gem in Su Li, and then finally Padma and Terry. That made six there, yielding a total of sixteen or seventeen. He counted Parvati and Lavender as viable alternates, as they were both reasonably strong despite their somewhat childish attitudes, especially Parvati. It was a rather nice haul in an overall sense.

"It looks like we've got a pretty solid selection pool. Now, let's all discuss what to do with them."

Harry used the room's magic to conjure himself a large goblet of pumpkin juice as Ron opened the next round of questioning.

"I'm not sure I'm really getting what you're trying to do here, mate. I'm assuming this is supposed to be something more than just some exclusive version of the D.A."

"Much more, Ron. This isn't going to be some silly club to improve our test scores. Give me a little credit. Voldemort has his Death Eaters and Dumbledore the Order of the Phoenix, though both thankfully only contain a handful of people worth the space they occupy in a battle. Fudge has an entire legion of Aurors at his command. If we're going to be an actual power in the long run, we need an army. I have some followers now, but the people we recruit and train here are going to be molded into our elite forces. My personal guard, as it were."

Bill stroked his chin thoughtfully. Harry seemed to recall Ron using the gesture before.

"It's a good idea, I think. It'll keep you occupied with something, and you aren't going to topple anybody with just the goblins and a small unit of ninja. Tell me the sort of training regimen do you have in mind."

“First, I do hope to recruit more followers outside of the school. I just have to get into contact with the right people first. As for the training program, that’s mostly what I’ve asked you here to help me decide. I have resolved that I’ll be personally training them to use the Dark Arts, but there’s quite a bit more to being efficient in battle situation than knowing a few curses.”

“Indeed. I’m not really a warrior by trade or anything, so I don’t know what exactly you should do. Still, I would imagine that you’d want to at least get them physically fit and put them through some basic martial arts training. They don’t need to be accomplished or anything, but they will need something to fall back on should they be disarmed of their wands in a fight. That’s all I can really think of. You should perhaps get in touch with Rodriguez for some other suggestions. He’s a professional, after all.”

Harry slapped his forehead with a conciliatory smile.

“You know, I almost forgot about him. Is he doing anything important now?”

“I’m not really sure. I think the President has him helping the ninja to pinpoint Death Eater strongholds based on the information they’re gathering, but I somehow doubt he’s absolutely vital there.”

“I wouldn’t imagine so. The Shinn Kohaku are rather self-sufficient. I’d like to bring him around here to take charge of training the force, if I can find somewhere for him to stay. Hitomi’s place doesn’t have any room between her and Kenzo. And since you mention it, talk to Grilthauk and have him forward me the locations of whatever of Voldemort’s bases we manage to uncover. I want to keep abreast of things as much as I can.”

Harry had momentarily forgotten that there were others in the room aside from himself and Bill, and had thoughtlessly spouted out a whole bunch of names that Ron and especially Cho were in the dark about. It was the latter who called him on it.

“Harry, who are all these people? And this Hitomi, is she the same person as the new Magical Stealth and Tracking teacher?”

He cringed inwardly at his mistake, but explained everything without exhibiting any outward signs of discomfort. Both of the other student members of his small discussion group knew already the general story, but were now more or less in the know about everything save for the Zharrghast issue. That was something that he refused to share with anybody, though Grilthauk and Kenzo knew some of it from his initial night in the village. Cho had a suspicious look on her face at the end of it, though it was Ron that voiced his thoughts first.

“Blimey, mate. So she was that girl from the village, then. Not bad at all...”

Harry cut Ron off before the redhead could really incriminate him. Cho had another comment about the kunoichi.

“I just knew there was something dodgy about that woman...”

Harry gave her a guarded look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Harry, I’ll tell you again. I’m not an idiot. She just miraculously shows up in Hogsmeade, supposedly from a country all the way across the world, right when Dumbledore needs somebody with her expertise. I don’t know whom she thought she was fooling. I originally believed she was a Death Eater, though. By the time you told me all about your summer, I had forgotten about her. At least she’s on our side. Pretty brilliant, sneaking a spy onto the school faculty.”

Harry had to admit, Hitomi had concocted a rather perforated cover story. Perhaps she had done it intentionally, knowing that Dumbledore would see through it immediately but still take it for being the truth, simply because no trained professional would ever try to use such an obviously convenient alibi. Of course, the old man had also seen Harry wearing Japanese robes around Grimmauld Place all throughout the summer, and had possibly ventured upon a connection there also. At any rate, Hitomi could take care of herself. It

didn't matter too much if the old coot suspected her. And Cho thought that Harry was behind her applying for her job. He opted to play along.

"Why thank you. It was one of my more insightful ideas. Now, let's get back on topic."

Fleur surprisingly offered something, speaking up for the first time since the impromptu strategy session began.

"Per'aps you might want to give 'zem some training in 'ze 'Ealing Arts. I 'ave some expertise in 'ze subject from my schooling at Beauxbatons."

That was an excellent suggestion, and one so obvious that Harry chided himself for not thinking of it beforehand. He had his charmed bottle of medicated water for his own use, but that was no good for the entire group.

"I hadn't even thought of that, to be honest. I have my own methods of treating wounds, but some basic first aid magic would be necessary on the field. If you'd be willing to teach it to the group, I'd appreciate it."

The quarter-veela nodded happily.

"Of course, 'Arry. I will give me some'zing to do, at 'ze least. 'Zose imbeciles in 'ze Order all 'zink 'zat I am all looks and no substance."

"Well, that's their mistake. Now you're with people who appreciate you and respect your talents. Now that my gears are also turning, I think I'd like to have some training in both guerrilla tactics and pitched battle strategy. Not that everybody in the unit is going to be giving orders or devising plans or the like, but it would help them to think on their feet. Of course, I have nowhere near the expertise to do it myself, and would probably benefit from the instruction also. Hopefully I can get Alberto to handle it. If not, we'll all probably get some level of Auror field training from Moody, but I'd rather our people have the advantage of extra teaching."

Bill had one final thought.

“I think that should be pretty good overall, but there’s one thing you’re overlooking. Dumbledore knows almost everything that goes on around this place. It’s going to be very difficult to orchestrate all of this without him or other students sniffing it out. And he also has Moody prowling around the grounds now.”

Harry saw the logic behind what Bill was saying. Using the Room of Requirement would be impossible. The Forbidden Forest was an option, but the likelihood of being assaulted by hostile centaur or acromantula was too great. The Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade was the best place available, but the old man probably had wards in place there as well, seeing as it was abandoned and directly connected to the school grounds. At that point, an idea popped into his head. It was difficult, but it could work.

“I see your point. We need to find a place far off the grounds, as well as a way to transport everybody there and back without anybody else knowing. The best means of transportation would be a Portkey, but I don’t know how to make one. As for a location, the Evans vault would be perfect. It has a full training facility, as well as a potions lab and an entire library of spellbooks.”

Ron had a possible solution.

“Why don’t you just ask Fudge to have a Portkey made for you? Just feed him some dodgy excuse about how your responsibilities as the head of your family will require you to travel off the grounds. That idiot won’t know any better. Besides, he knows his career’s sunk if you turn against him. He’ll do whatever you ask of him.”

Harry sneered. His pumpkin juice long since finished, he mentally asked the room for a bottle of Firewhiskey and five glasses. Filling each to the brim, he handed them out, naturally keeping one for himself. Fleur wrinkled her nose at the hard liquor and called for a glass of wine instead, and Ron took her glass as well.

“Have one made legally, you say? Using the law to break the law. Excellent. Everybody, I think we have a workable plan. Now, let’s have a toast. To the first step in creating a new world.”

Six glasses clashed gently together, Ron holding one in each hand. Once the liquid had been drained, everybody went his or her separate ways. Bill and Fleur returned to his flat in London. Ron headed back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry went to the Head Girl's dormitory with Cho, finally taking the time to check out her rooms in the few hours remaining before supper. That night, Mars burned just a shade brighter in the heavens.

(End Chapter Eighteen)

Author's Note: Hey, my apologies for the late update. It seemed for a while like some higher power didn't want me posting this chapter. I had family in town for most of the last week for my youngest brother's high school graduation, and every time I tried to write, I would be dragged away for something. And then I finally did manage to get some work done, and this site went into read-only mode for several days. Annoying.

I had originally planned to get some dueling into this chapter, but it turned out not happening. The next chapter will be more or less devoted to action, as we'll be in Alastor Moody's special practical class, and you just have to know he isn't going to set them to learning about grindylows. There will be some fighting, not to reveal too much beforehand. I rather enjoyed giving Blaise some backstory, and I'm going to try and get Hermione a bit more involved in the plot here directly. I really have been ignoring her a bit, though it was by design.

And I guess that's about all there is to say. For those of you who follow my other story as well, I'll be starting work on the fourth chapter after class tomorrow. Anybody who hasn't read it, give it a try. It's not your typical Harry Potter fic, but I'm having a blast writing it. Hope you all enjoy, and please review.

Six glasses clashed gently together, Ron holding one in each hand. Once the liquid had been drained, everybody went his or her separate ways. Bill and Fleur returned to his flat in London. Ron headed back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry went to the Head Girl's dormitory with Cho, finally taking the time to check out her rooms in the few hours remaining before supper. That night, Mars burned just a shade brighter in the heavens.

Chapter Nineteen: Princes and Prodigies – The Trio Reunited

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Following the directions on Moody's parchment found Harry well out into the school grounds and skirting the edge of the Forbidden Forest. In the half an hour, the young wizard had taken a rather scenic route around most of the castle and a good bit of the surroundings. In vintage Alastor Moody fashion, the first charmed parchment from class had led to another, and that one to a third and so on, resulting in Harry having to take a roundabout route to wherever his final destination might be. Sensing that this lesson would entail far more than just some lecture and application, he had come properly dressed for a fight, wearing all of his armaments, as well as his battle robes, and carrying his kodachi and medicated water. He had also summoned his pets upon leaving the confines of the castle, and the two beasts kept a sharp watch both in front of and behind him. He finally reached a large spruce tree located about a hundred feet on the wrong side of the forest's boundary. A large piece of parchment was attached to the trunk with instructions to wait. Annoyed, Harry leaned up against the tree.

He didn't have to wait all that long. Within the next ten minutes or so, others began assembled at his location. The first was Hermione, who looked rather surprised to see Harry standing there. Ginny and Luna showed up immediately after as a pair, which made no sense at all. They were both in the year below, and therefore shouldn't be in the advanced class. Harry watched as Neville hesitantly approached from the distance as Hermione addressed the two younger girls with a frown

"You two shouldn't be here. This is the NEWT Defense class."

Luna only shrugged and sent a brief smile at Harry as Ginny responded flippantly.

“Professor Moody asked us to come out for extra credit. Thing is, I have no idea what we’re supposed to be doing.”

Harry nodded at Neville as the pudgy boy arrived and kept a watch in the distance, expecting a sixth to come strolling up at any moment. And as predicted, Ron soon came stomping down the path, muttering about how much he hated the Forbidden Forest and glancing ever which way, as if expecting Aragog to leap out from behind a bush and devour him at the moment that he dropped his guard. The redhead didn’t notice the rest until he was almost upon them. The six Hogwarts students involved in the previous term’s battle at the Department of Mysteries were assembled once more.

“Hey, what are you lot all doing here?”

“Apparently the same thing you are...whatever that is.”

As if to answer Harry’s remark, words began to appear on the blank parchment detailing the nature of the assignment. It had been charmed to reveal its contents as soon as the entire group had assembled. Every student in the sixth and seventh year Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, and apparently a few fifth years, had been randomly assorted into squads of roughly half a dozen. Harry snorted at that comment, as his team was hardly placed together by coincidence.

Each team was to be assigned to track down and neutralize one of the others, with orders to stun or disarm only. Moody and other faculty members would be roving about to collect the wands of disarmed students and revive those knocked out. So, essentially, Harry and his friends would know whom they were to attack, but not who else would be attacking them. It was probably as close to an actual combat situation as could be produced within the confines of the school, though it did have certain flaws. It was entirely possible that a team could get wiped out before ever engaging their targets, allowing some squads an easier time than others might have.

Regardless, Harry and Ron wore identical grins upon seeing their “randomly” chosen opponents: Draco Malfoy, Gregory Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, Theodore Nott, Millicent Bulstrode, and a person that Harry imagined to be an unwilling teammate of the remainder in Adrian Pucey.

It was blatantly obvious that Moody had intentionally rigged the pairings to allow Harry and his friends to pound the snot out of Malfoy and his goons and completely get away with it. It was likely the retired Auror’s subtle way of expressing his discontent at being forced to teach junior Death Eaters. Due to the war raging outside, Dumbledore had opened NEWT Defense to any student who wished to take it, regardless of their OWL scores. This assignment was going to be a joke. Pucey was the only competent wizard among the six, and both Goyle and Parkinson were just barely qualified to hold a wand.

“Over five years we’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this, mate.”

“Rather fortunate for us that the old man’s letting everybody into the class. You know, I’ve been looking for an excuse to practice my nastier curses.”

Hermione glared at both boys reprovably.

“The instructions say to stun or disarm only. And you two both plan on becoming Aurors, honestly.”

Harry and Ron shared a knowing glance with Ginny. The de facto leader of the group gave the official response.

“We both tanked Potions, so the Auror Academy is out for us. Besides, you can’t honestly be trying to convince us that the Slytherins don’t deserve every ounce of what’s coming to them. Like Ron said, we’ve been tolerating them for years. But if it’ll really make you feel better, we’ll stun them once we’re done hexing them into slime.”

The bushy-haired girl tried to look indignant, but couldn’t prevent a smile from surfacing on her face.

“Well, just don’t do anything that might get you into serious trouble.”

Harry flashed the same conspiratorial grin that he and Ron had shared to his other best friend. Hopefully she might even get inspired to practice some of those Dark Arts that she’d not so secretly read up on at Grimmauld Place during the summer. All three of them had legitimately killed people, and yet Hermione was still holding stock in school rules. It was utterly ridiculous.

“See, you’re an accomplice whether you like it or not. That’s our girl. And we’ll even let you smack Malfoy in his ferret face again once we’ve had our fun.”

The girl smirked and shook her head, as Neville hesitantly fielded a question. Luna seemed to be staring mistily out into the forest.

“Just how exactly are we supposed to go about doing this? We don’t even know where to start looking.”

Ron stroked his chin thoughtfully, in what seemed to be a universal Weasley gesture.

“Well, we’re a bit too obvious moving about in a group. Not even the likes of Goyle are completely stupid...”

Harry nodded.

“True. Even the most base and stupid of creatures has basic instincts. And we have quite a lot of ground to cover. I say we split into two groups. Any three of us should easily be able to hold off all six of those pathetic excuses for wizards and witches long enough for the rest to arrive.”

The idea met with approval from five of the six, but Luna Lovegood was still off in her own little world. Ginny shook the distracted girl by the shoulder and regained her attention for a moment.

“So then, who goes with who?”

Harry thought it best to take the weakest two with him, as he could assuredly defeat the entirety of Slytherin House on his own, to say nothing of a group of six, only one of whom was anything beyond mediocre. On the other hand, if the other group were to run across the enemy first, they would need the best of the rest to realistically hold out.

"I'll take Neville and Luna with me and cover the area around here. The rest of you sweep the grounds closer to the castle entrance. If I know Moody, he'll have placed everybody outside and thus open to attack from any angle. If you three run across Malfoy and the rest before we do, signal us by firing a Stunner straight into the air."

"We will, Harry. Just be careful, and try not to maim anybody, please."

"Yes, mother. Oh, and do keep clear of the library tonight. Ron and I really need to talk to you after class. It's rather important."

"Fine, then. The two of you owe me some explanations anyway."

Hermione and the two Weasleys departed quickly after, leaving Harry with a slightly trembling Neville and a once more distracted Luna. The girl's wide silver eyes, far prettier and so much more mysterious than those possessed by both male Malfoys, were roving about quickly into the deepening forest.

"Luna...what are you looking for out there? We need to get moving."

The strange Ravenclaw turned back to regard Harry.

"It almost feels as if we're being watched. Surely you can sense it as well."

Harry felt nothing and thus simply wrote the idea off as another one of Luna's nonsensical ramblings. Still, it was equally likely as not to be true, given the diversity of creatures that called the Forbidden Forest home.

"It's possible, but I'm not feeling anything. The place gives me the creeps. Let's go."

Neville started for the clearing in a rush, and Luna followed nonchalantly behind. Grindelwald and Khariana were both looking out into the woods in the same direction that Luna had been, and Harry began to realize that she had been right. No sooner than the others were out of immediate range, an arrow whizzed by dangerously close to his head and imbedded itself in the tree a few inches below Moody's charmed parchment. A note was attached to the projectile, apparently intended for Harry.

XXXXXXXXXX

Harry Potter, you are requested to return to the forest on the night of the next full moon. Recent movements in the stars have caused our herd's elders to express a wish to speak directly with you. Prove to us your valor by making the journey alone. May the heavens continue to guide your path, young warrior.

XXXXXXXXXX

The note was obviously from the Centaur. Harry glanced in the direction from which the arrow had come. Indeed, one of them stood there holding an ornate longbow. He recognized the Centaur's black hair and fierce demeanor after a moment's thought. It was Bane, who was perhaps the most staunchly anti-human of the herd. Bane gave Harry a curt nod and vanished back into the trees from whence he had come. Harry carefully folded the note into his robes and left to catch up with the other two, resolving to consider the matter when time permitted.

The small party of five, pets included, hadn't far to go before coming across a few of their targets. As they patrolled about the edge of the Forbidden Forest, a red light indicating a Stunner flashed through Harry's field of vision. Motioning for the others to stay behind, he moved in to get a closer look, and glimpsed a small battle taking place. Nott and Bulstrode were doubling up against a single Ravenclaw, while a bored looking Pucey leaned against a nearby tree watching on, making no effort to assist them. Hannah Abbott and Lisa Turpin lay disarmed and bound on the mossy ground nearby, along with some seventh year Gryffindor whom Harry didn't recognize. Likely Pucey's work, as his two cohorts were being easily outgunned by their one opponent.

Harry took a better look at the girl, who had shining raven hair that extended to just below her shoulders. Harry had at first nearly mistaken her for Cho, but upon closer inspection noticed that her skin was a shade or two lighter than his girlfriend's, and her features somewhat plainer. She was even smaller than the petite Ravenclaw Seeker and had a mousy look to her, not having really filled out like the other girl had over the last few years. Not ugly, but also a girl that one likely wouldn't give a second look to. She was definitely Chinese, though, and had to be that Su Li girl that Cho had been so high on that afternoon in the Room of Requirement. Harry stayed back to watch her fight, curious to find out if she was indeed as good as promised.

The show was strikingly short. Nott had managed to recover from the defensive for just long enough to snap off a Bone Breaking Curse, classified as minor Dark Arts. Su calmly deflected it towards Bulstrode with a Shield Charm and also cast a forceful Stunner of her own at the burly Slytherin girl, who barely dodged Nott's curse but got nailed square in the face by Su's. The slight victorious smile that crossed the Ravenclaw's face indicated that she had aimed right at Bulstrode's head on purpose. Harry was liking her already. Nott looked slightly afraid after seeing his partner felled with such ease and looked to Pucey for help, only to receive a mocking sneer from the Head Boy in response. In doing so, he had made the critical mistake of taking his eyes off of his opponent, and paid dearly for it. Su muttered an incantation in Mandarin and blasted off a sickly lime colored curse at Nott, who took it in the side and fell to his knees violently retching his insides out. Harry toyed with the idea of sealing the boy's mouth shut and letting him choke to death on his own vomit, but decided to let Su finish her little exhibition. She elected to let Nott suffer for a few minutes before lifting her spell and disarming him to end the fight.

Upon seeing Nott taken out, Pucey rolled his eyes and redrew his own wand to attempt to deal with Su. Harry decided to have his own fun at that point and waited until the Quidditch player was well out in front of him before leveling his masterpiece wand.

"Expelliarmus. Incarcerous."

Pucey's wand flew into Harry's hand as thin cords wrapped around his ankles, sending him crashing face first into a pile of mud and soiling his expensive robes. Harry took especial care to step onto the small of the arrogant Head Boy's back as he emerged from his hidden vantage point and mildly applauded the only other person standing.

"Very nice. I'm afraid I just couldn't let you have all the fun, though. Harry Potter, by the way. Pleasure watching you do your stuff."

Su managed a shaky smile, despite being visibly nervous at the fact that the legendary Harry Potter was actually talking to her.

"Of course, everybody knows who you are. And thank you."

Su's Chinese accent was much thicker than Cho's. Harry supposed that her general inclination towards reticence at school had not allowed for her speech to adapt as well as the other girl's.

"It's only polite to introduce myself. And you're Su Li. Cho speaks very highly of you. And for good reason, judging from what I've just seen. It's really a shame you weren't in the D.A. last year. I think we all could have learned a few things from you."

Harry's complimentary tone seemed to mollify the small girl's inherent shyness somewhat, though she still seemed a bit uncomfortable.

"It's nothing much, really. I've just been training for a long time. And besides, I don't do very well around lots of people."

"Maybe I can help with that shyness. It's not every day that I come across somebody with skills like yours. I'll bet you have trouble finding suitable opponents around here."

"Yes, that is a problem. Everybody always talks about how powerful you are, though."

Harry understood exactly what she wanted but was afraid to ask for. A quick and friendly duel with this obviously skilled witch might be fun, and it would give him a perfect opportunity to see what she could really do. Besides, Pucey was the only threat among his designated opponents, and he was now neutralized. The most skilled among those remaining was Malfoy, and that wasn't saying very much at all. None of his teammates were in any danger at this point, as Harry supposed that even Neville could take down Draco without much trouble should he simply put aside his fear of the Slytherin and fight him. Harry had time enough to indulge his curiosity a bit further.

"I have my moments. But I'm quite curious about you, Miss Li. I want to see what you're really capable of. Since these losers are out of the way, I hope you might be willing to accept a match with me."

Su flashed a smile that made her look much prettier than before.

"I would be honored, Mister Potter. Whenever you're ready, then."

She dropped into a dueling stance that looked to be a cross between formal wizarding style and martial arts. Harry raised an eyebrow at the unorthodox stance and stripped his battle robes and upper body armaments. Removing his leg guards was too much of a hassle, but the duel would be no contest at all if he kept his gear on entirely. He smirked slightly in satisfaction upon seeing a slight blush suffuse the timid girl's cheeks as she gazed over his toned form. Harry also sent a mental command to his two pets ordering them not to interfere in the exercise, as they were watching from the foliage.

"There, things ought to be even now. Let's keep this friendly. No spells that will cause any serious bodily harm."

Su regained her composure immediately and nodded cheerfully.

"Understood. Stupefy!"

Harry was impressed. He hadn't expected the girl to initiate the battle. Most would be afraid to attack him without being instigated. Her compact Stunner would fell most wizards, but would only barely graze Harry's aura. He hadn't really expected her to be able to match

magical strength with him, but still shifted aside and countered rapidly.”

“Expelliarmus. Impedimenta. Incarcerous.”

“Protego.”

Good reflexes, Harry mused. Her protective shield was up no sooner than he had cast his first spell. She had been holding back quite a bit with Nott and Bulstrode. Su’s shield buckled heavily upon the first spell’s impact, and shattered on the second. She moved aside quickly to avoid it and leapt over the low flying entangling cords produced by Harry’s third spell, propelling herself directly towards him at a high speed. Her left hand lashed out at a key pressure point on his wand arm as she approached and simultaneously sheathed her wand into a holster on her belt with the other. Even the most powerful opponents were susceptible to such attacks, and Harry would have found his right arm crippled had it connected. Su’s incorporation of a martial arts stance into her dueling form was obviously not just for show. The Shinn Kohaku often employed pressure point attacks in order to incapacitate their foes at close range as well, and Kenzo had shown Harry how to recognize and avoid such attacks one morning during his stay in the village. He twisted his wrist slightly and Su’s attack missed its target point. Harry trapped her arm with his own, pinning it against his side with a quick motion.

“Nice try, but you’ll have to do more than that.”

Su grunted in response and struck at his neck with her free hand. This time, a direct hit to the pressure point would render him immediately unconscious. She obviously wanted to win this rather badly. Harry moved his own unoccupied hand to counter with an almost unnatural speed and deflected Su’s attack halfway, grasping her bicep to prevent a repeat. Now the two were at a standstill, each with both arms occupied. Su grinned at him.

“It seems we’re at a draw. Not even you can fight with both hands tied up.”

“Don’t assume too much just yet, sweetheart.”

Harry shifted his weight forward, attempting to use his larger size to pin the diminutive Chinese girl to the ground and free up his wand arm. She turned the tables by planting a knee into his gut and flipping him over her head. Harry could hardly believe that a girl not even half his size had just gotten the better of him in a grapple. Far from being irritated, he actually found the scenario to be rather hot, and couldn't stop himself from momentarily wondering whether or not the tiny girl was also that flexible in the bedroom. Su scrambled back onto her feet first and pivoted slightly on a leg. Harry knew that she was about to attempt a roundhouse kick to the half risen dakaathi hybrid's head, but she apparently thought better of it and decided not to push her luck through continuing to fight at grappling range with the much stronger young wizard. It was a smart move, as her light body would prevent her from inflicting much damage and she would be left wide open to a harsh counterattack. Su instead opted to force some distance between them by springing back, again drawing her wand and snapping off a spell.

"Conjuvictus!"

Harry rolled out of the spell's path and aimed his wand, casting a spell of his own upon landing.

"Stupefy."

Su didn't bother with a defensive charm, having correctly estimated that her shields wouldn't be able to hold up against the stronger wizard's Stunner. She instead jumped sideways to avoid the spell and retaliated with a barrage of spell fire.

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Densaugeo! Stupefy!"

"...Protego."

Despite Su's best efforts, all four spells combined failed to make a dent in Harry's shield. He smirked at her, almost as if daring her to up the ante.

"Come on. I know you're better than this. Stop holding back."

“Fine, but you asked for it.”

The Chinese girl's eyes narrowed and she started blasting off curses intoned in her native tongue. The first was the same lime green spell that had dispatched Nott. Harry simply allowed it to come, confident in the power of his defensive barrier. Needless to say, he was most surprised when the curse phased right through. Harry was just barely able to duck in time and abandon his position in order to evade the remainder of the assault. Su pressed the attack relentlessly, and he was a bit chagrined to note that he had barely enough time to even think of returning fire. Harry didn't dare attempt to defend with magic, as he had no idea what she was throwing at him and even less of a clue as to how to counter it. However, she couldn't last much longer. Su was depleting her magical reserves, and was having increasing difficulty in keeping the stream of curses going. After roughly ninety seconds of constant casting, she had to stop and allow her energies to recharge momentarily. Harry had no intention of giving her a breather.

“Stupefy.”

Miraculously, she managed to cast another spell. Her incantation conjured what appeared to be a gong head emblazoned with red Chinese ideograms in front of her. The spell loudly reflected off of the created structure and flew back at Harry with almost triple its original speed. He was forced to throw himself onto the ground in order to dodge. As she watched cautiously for his next move, Harry glanced into his peripheral vision and saw spells flying from near where he had left Neville and Luna. As much as he was the duel, he needed to get back to his friends. It was time to cease toying with her and end it. He sprang around to Su's flank where he would be well out of that infernal gong shield's path and slammed his wand like a hammer at the ground. The earth trembled violently underneath the girl's feet and knocked her down with a shriek. Harry intoned his spell before she had even started to fall.

“Incarcerous.”

His aim was spot-on. The cords wrapped themselves around Su's body, forcing her to drop her wand. Harry summoned the ornate cherry stick to his hand and sealed his victory. He then banished the bindings around Su and returned her wand to her before helping her back to her feet. Far from being upset at her loss, the girl hugged him gently.

"That was so wonderful. I have never had so much fun in my entire life. Promise me we can do this again sometime."

Harry had no problem with that whatsoever. She had exceeded anything he could have expected of her. Naturally, had he been taking the fight truly seriously, it would have been over within a few exchanges. He had held back the entire time, wanting only to test her. Su boasted decent magical power with extensive spell knowledge, and was an accomplished hand-to-hand fighter as well. She was extremely resourceful and capable of thinking on her feet. She had taken a fight that she had no chance of winning in terms of strength or skill and had made it very competitive through the use of tactics and guild. She was in every respect the very epitome of what he planned for those in his unit to be.

"Whenever you like. But for now, I need to go and look after my team. See you around."

"I will see you later, then. My reserves are completely exhausted."

"Right. It really was a blast, Miss Li. Just talk to me or send an owl when you're free for another go."

"Just Su, if you don't mind. I have to suffer enough formality at home. I don't need it among my friends."

Harry ran a hand through his hair.

"Just one quick duel and we're friends already, then?"

The girl cast her eyes downward with a hurt expression. It was rather obvious that she wasn't particularly used to normal conversation on a regular basis.

"I apologize. I didn't mean to presume..."

"I was only kidding. I'd love to be your friend, and I hope you'll come and hang out with the rest of our little entourage sometime. And it's Harry. I hate formalities also."

He wasn't being dishonest, as he really did desire her friendship. However, his reasons for feeling that way were somewhat more complex than simple camaraderie. Cho was correct in saying that making that little bit of personal effort would have a powerful effect with this girl. If everything went well and she assimilated into his circle, he would gain a very powerful helper, already skilled enough that she could hold her own with even some of the higher-ranking Death Eaters. While she would be mercilessly routed by a Lucius Malfoy or a Bellatrix Lestrange, she was every bit a match for the likes of Avery or the elder Crabbe or Goyle. Harry could improve her skills even further with additional training in the Dark Arts. She would stand among his most powerful and feared.

By the time Harry had wrapped things up with Su and gotten back over to Neville and Luna, their battle was already over. Ron and the others were also waiting there, the tall redhead sporting a few bruises as he supported a panting Neville while Hermione revived an incapacitated Luna. Both Seamus and Susan Bones were also knocked out on the ground. Neville fixed Harry with the angriest expression that the meek boy was capable of when he arrived.

"There you are, finally. Where were you when we got attacked earlier?"

Harry shrugged lazily.

"I was stuck in a fight of my own. Tell me what happened here."

"Those two snuck up on us while you were in the woods. I was able to beat Seamus, but Susan took out Luna after a long duel. I had to fight her after then, and thankfully Ron and the rest showed up to help and hexed her from behind. I don't think I could have taken Susan by myself."

Ron clapped Neville on the back.

“Stop selling yourself short, mate. You were holding your own just fine.”

“...It’s only because she was tired. Luna pushed her to the limit before losing to her.”

Ginny joined in trying to embolden the rotund Gryffindor.

“Honestly, Neville. You’re a lot better than you give yourself credit for. Have some confidence in yourself.”

Neville blushed and nodded.

“You’re right, both of you. I should.”

Harry turned to Ron.

“What happened with you three? Did you run into Malfoy and the others?”

Ron guffawed loudly.

“Did we ever. We caught up to those gits right outside of the greenhouses. Parkinson has more boils and warts on her face now than Dumbledore has wrinkles thanks to Ginny. As for me, I broke that great ugly tosser Goyle’s jaw with one punch. He took a swing and missed, and then I just killed him with a right cross. He never saw it coming. But you should have seen Malfoy. The ferret went running like a scared little girl back to the dungeons. I’ll bet he pissed himself.”

Harry was reminded of his dear departed cousin’s regaling the elder Dursleys with tales of his boxing exploits while Ron gushed about his fight with Goyle. The redhead naturally neglected to mention that he had obviously taken a haymaker or two in his own right judging from the shiner over his left eye. Harry was more interested in hearing about Malfoy’s humiliation.

"I take it Hermione was the one that dealt with him, then."

"Yeah. She had the git on the ropes from the very start. He tried to use Dark Arts on her, and she somehow knew all the counter spells for everything he threw out. He was pissed, mate. And then he saw Parkinson and Goyle down and took off like he was being chased by You-Know-Who. Typical Slytherin, that one. Leaving his friends behind. It's too bad. I wanted to hex the bloody ferret myself. We'll get him later, though."

Hermione didn't meet either of their gazes when Ron spoke of her being able to counter Malfoy's illegal curses in kind. After all, many dark spells can only be negated with other dark spells. Her being willing to use them in battle was a welcome surprise, but she still seemed to be holding to some last vestiges of her old prejudices and respect for the wizarding laws regarding the occult. Harry hoped that he and Ron could cure her of those leanings once and for all tonight.

"We will, Ron. Count on it. He's obviously finding what passes for his spine again, trying to use those kinds of spells on Hermione here. He'll make another stupid move soon enough. Malfoy never seems to learn his lesson. And we'll take him to school for the last time when he does."

"I hear that. I hope those other three got lost in the woods and eaten by Aragog or something."

"No such luck. Bulstrode got capped in the head with a Stunner, Nott was forced to puke his guts up, and Pucey's got a mouthful of mud and ruined robes to boot. Maybe the Centaur will find them before the staff does."

"Nah, we're not that lucky."

After a few more minutes of conversation, Harry revived both Seamus and Susan and the entire group made back to the castle for supper. The young wizard sat with the Ravenclaws at the evening meal, going over the day's happenings with Cho and taking a few minutes to chat with Su and Luna as well. Apparently a small party of other students had observed Harry's duel with the small girl unbeknownst

to either of them, and it was a favorite topic of discussion in the Great Hall that night. Harry noted with some satisfaction that Malfoy didn't dare show his face, apparently unwilling to face his potential wrath for what he had attempted to do to Hermione.

Late that evening, when most of Gryffindor Tower had already turned in for the night, Harry and Ron both headed down into the common room. Hermione was sitting at a table writing a Potions essay. She smiled at Harry as he sat down in a nearby armchair and cast Silencing Charms all around the three of them. Ron took a seat at the table next to her. It was time to finally make a bid to win the final member of the infamous Gryffindor Trio back over with the other two.

"I don't understand the need for the Silencing Charms, Harry. I thought we were just going to have a chat..."

"Some of the things we have to say are sensitive. First, you said you wanted some explanations out of us. Go ahead and ask."

"Fine, then. I will. Explain why you've both been avoiding me all term. You've been the worst, Harry. Sneaking around everywhere like some sort of thief ever since we got here. I understand that you have a girlfriend, but I know you're not spending that much time with her."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment.

"Several reasons. I'm not going to insult you by denying that I've been keeping my distance. The main issue was that I thought that you simply needed some space. You've had a quite a bit to deal with lately, nearly losing your life at the Ministry and then accidentally killing Crabbe on the train. And then there was the issue of your messing around in my Dark Arts tomes over the summer. Yes, Hermione. I know all about that."

Hermione stared incredulously at him.

"You knew what I was going through, and you didn't say anything..."

"There was nothing that I could say. Attempting to meddle in your business would only alienate you. Dumbledore always did that with me, you know. It did me no favors."

Ron added in his opinion.

"I didn't know what to do either. I would have helped if I could, you know that."

She shook her head.

"Well, I suppose I can accept that. But don't be so hard on Dumbledore, Harry. He's doing his best to protect us."

Harry scoffed loudly.

"I used to believe that. But the fact of the matter is that his best is wholly insufficient. And that brings me to the heart of all this. That man has made too many mistakes recently. That's why I've created my own force in all of this. I'm going to succeed where Dumbledore and the Order are failing. If they can't stop Voldemort and bring peace to our society, then I will."

"Harry...that's ridiculous. An army...what army? What are you talking about?"

Harry went on to explain everything to her. He started with the true circumstances of his inheritance and transformation, going on to describe the events of his month in the village and those who had pledged themselves to help in his revolution. He concluded with telling her of his refusal to join the Order of the Phoenix, his temporary alliance with Fudge and the Ministry, and his plan to turn the former D.A. into a formal military unit. Hermione seemed to be increasingly thoughtful and indignant at the same time as he continued to tell his story.

"...That concludes my story. You wanted to know why I haven't been around, and now I've told you. I believe that it's my destiny to end this war, Hermione. People all over our world believe in me, and not just wizards and witches. What I want goes beyond just getting rid of Voldemort. I'm going to tear down this corrupt husk of a government and rebuild it, create a wizarding world that treats all beings with an equal hand. I want to foster a utopia, where there will never again be

cause for a Tom Riddle to rise in dark rebellion. And I need you to help me do it.”

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head, apparently trying to come to terms with what she had just been told.

“Harry, this is madness. You’re talking about destroying the entire structure of our society, killing countless people. You don’t have any more right to decide the fate of the wizarding world than Voldemort or Fudge. And for you to even jest at destroying Dumbledore. I can’t believe this.”

Harry sighed. He knew that this wasn’t going to be easy, but he was confident of success.

“I have no desire to physically harm Dumbledore. I simply want him to stand aside and allow the next generation to shape the world in its image. Look at this objectively. He can’t lead our world to victory against Voldemort, and he isn’t willing to see our festering institutions change for the better.”

“Harry...”

“Think about this, Hermione. I’m asking you to stand by me. With the three of us working together like we always have before, there’s nothing we can’t do. Listen to your feelings and you’ll understand that what I’m saying is right.”

Hermione said nothing for several minutes, looking back and forth between Harry and Ron with doubt in her coffee brown eyes. Finally, she spoke again.

“I think that you’re making a huge mistake. There must be some way for me to make you understand...”

Harry shook his head.

“I’m afraid not, Hermione. I’ve chosen my path, and I’m not turning back. I’ve come too far now to quit. I won’t betray the faith of those who’ve placed their lives and futures into my hands. I have the power

and following, as well as the resources to see this through to the bitter end. I want your help, but I will move on without it.”

Hermione appeared appreciative of the fact that Harry had the resolve to follow his plans to their natural end, regardless of the consequences. She had the intelligence to understand that he was correct. Their world was slowly dying, and it would take a powerful hand to save it.

“I see. All right, then. I suppose there’s only one thing for me to do.”

Ron ran a hand through his hair.

“What are you saying, ‘Mione?”

“I’m saying that you can count me in. It’s not as if I haven’t helped with your crazy ventures before. I’ve missed being around both of you, and I guess this will be our greatest test yet. But I’m going to make sure that you never lose sight of what you’re trying to do. I won’t even try to stop you from killing. I’m not so blind that I can’t understand why it’s necessary. I hate it, but the only alternative is to kneel and surrender our world to Voldemort, to accept being exterminated like animals. And to be truly honest, I agree with you. Not on everything, mind you, but the Ministry is hopelessly corrupt, and its prejudiced policies towards other races are disgusting. Perhaps together we really can change things for the better. I believe that we can.”

Harry nodded.

“And we will. With you back with us now, I have no doubts of it.”

To be honest, Harry felt assured of his success regardless. But having his two best friends squarely with him alleviated those small strings of doubt that had lingered inside him. He would have always had that slightest bit of reluctance to pursue any path that would have hurt either of them. Now that was no longer an issue, and he could move forward with no regrets. Harry pretended not to notice Ron holding Hermione’s hand under the table as he stood and headed upstairs for the night, his head much clearer than it had been in months.

Nearly a week later, Harry waited alone in the middle of Hitomi's training grounds near the Whomping Willow. The time had come to begin training his personal force. Those approached had all accepted his proposal. He had received the Portkey that he had requested from Fudge, having sent the letter out the morning after that strategy session in the Room of Requirement. It came in the form of a small pin, with instructions to attach it to whatever item he desired to serve as the transport apparatus. Harry had chosen the emerald snitch necklace that Cho had given him for his birthday. Its long chain could be easily grasped by the entire gathering, and he always wore the adornment on his person, allowing him to move about whenever he needed. Now all he had to do was wait for the others to arrive. There was still an hour left before curfew, so the students could assemble without drawing undue suspicion.

Meanwhile, he took some time to reflect upon recent happenings. He had begun to formulate his strategy for Halloween night and embarked on an intensive training regimen to prepare for the battle. Su Li was his preferred dueling partner, but he usually brought in others to help as well. Cho was a usual participant, as were Hermione and any assortment of Weasleys. He set them to attacking him as a group, giving him additional experience in fighting against large groups and dealing with several different combat styles at once. Harry felt his skills improving daily, and only hoped that they would be enough to see him through his trial. He would fight the battle alone, knowing that his friends would not be prepared to take on the Dark Lord directly. Their lives were too important to him. He had an initial strategy in mind that he hoped would confuse and dishearten Voldemort's minions enough to allow him to face the evil overlord and win.

The day after the events of Moody's practical class, Harry had bitten the bullet and returned to Hogsmeade to face up to telling Hitomi everything about Cho. She had been surprisingly understanding about it, though still visibly jealous. In the end, she was satisfied with the fact that he would never replace her, and that she fulfilled the needs of a part of him that the other girl never could. She also explained that she was fully aware of the philandering nature of his demonic kin, having overheard Grilthauk explaining it to her grandfather while Harry was sleeping that first night in the village.

Harry hoped that things would go so smoothly when it came to doing the reverse and explaining Hitomi to Cho, though that hope was dismal at best. His relationship with the Chinese beauty was progressing as well as could be expected, and she received a letter of praise from her father regarding her landing Harry after the man had seen the photograph of them together in the news parchment. Song Chang had also stated in that letter that Harry would be receiving a very important owl from him in the coming weeks, though that had yet to arrive.

Voldemort had finally broken his silence a few nights ago, personally leading a raid on a Muggle village in Devonshire. His forces were still in disarray thanks to the efforts of the student defenders in the train debacle, but his attack let it be known that he was far from being vanquished. Harry had learned through one of his arranged liaisons with Mrs. Malfoy that the Dark Lord was laying plans to break his Inner Circle from Azkaban and also stepping up recruitment efforts abroad, with hopes of drawing heavily from traditionally dark-oriented countries in Eastern Europe. He was attempting to forge alliance pacts with various vampire clans across the continent as well, in a motion to compensate for his dwindling pool of potential Death Eaters within Britain. Harry promptly relayed the information about the planned raid on Azkaban to the Ministry of Magic, which immediately beefed up security at the prison. Fudge promised to expedite the trials of those caught at the Department of Mysteries and hopefully see them executed before their master could come to free them.

Slowly, the candidates came wandering up to the designated rendezvous point. Ron was the first, followed by Su and Cho together, and the rest came along in a timely manner. There were nineteen in all, as he had chosen to invite Parvati and Lavender in simply to save Hermione the trouble of having to keep her actions hidden from them. Harry configured the Portkey to ferry them to the main hall of the Evans vault, where training would begin in earnest.

“Are we all ready?”

Everybody nodded, and Harry activated the device. He felt that familiar tug in his navel, and they were off.

(End Chapter Nineteen)

Author's Note: Another chapter, gone. I'm pretty satisfied with the way that a lot of this came out, except for the entire conversation with Hermione towards the end. I hope those of you that wanted some more action are satisfied. The next battle will be Halloween, which I am very much looking forward to writing.

Back to Hermione, that section didn't come off very well at all. It was one of those things that I knew I needed to write, but no inspiration as to how to make it work well came to me. I just sort of had to wing it, and I'm less than pleased with the result. Still, I don't find it entirely unrealistic. It's sort of the same principle that Harry experienced when recruiting Ron. His friends are much more loyal to him than he gives them credit for. Hermione knew that she couldn't stop Harry from doing what he was doing, so she chose to go along with him rather than have to line up against him. And honestly, she does agree with some of his ideals, particularly creating an equal society for all magical races. I may rewrite much of that scene if some better ideas come to me later. If so, I'll make mention of it in the next chapter.

I'm currently exploring the idea of having a number of the known Death Eaters defect to Harry's side at some point. I'd like to get some feedback on the idea, whether it would be a good idea or a bad one, and perhaps suggestions on who to have defect. Bellatrix is not a viable choice, however. Neither is Wormtail, because I hate him. Everybody else is fair game, though I am reluctant to use Lucius Malfoy because of Rodriguez and his justified hatred for the man. But on the other hand, Lucius dueling Draco to the death with the elder being on the "good" side for a change is a tempting idea. Of course, I likely won't use this idea at all. Depends on how I feel when I get to putting the related device into the plot. Hope you lot enjoyed, and don't forget to hit that review button. Next chapter will have the first training session and probably Harry's meeting with the Centaur elders.

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Chapter Twenty: Knighthood – Heaven’s Favor

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

In barely an instant, the twenty students were magically transported across the whole of Great Britain, from the lush pastures of the Hogwarts grounds in Scotland to the cold subterranean of London, where the Evans vault lay. His companions all looked around in amazement at the various facilities of the underground base, none of them having much of an idea what to expect before departing. Harry had kept their actual destination to himself due to the unlikely possibility that one or more among them might turn out to be untrue and snitch on the rest to the old man. Dumbledore still had no knowledge that this facility even existed, and Harry intended to keep things that way. He felt Cho's soft hand on his shoulder and looked over to meet her gaze.

“What is this place, Harry?”

Harry slid into her, allowing her arm to snake around his waist before turning around to gaze upon his future followers, most of who were looking at him inquisitively. He rolled his eyes ever so slightly as he saw Blaise glaring venomously at his girlfriend. Deciding that he didn't want to waste time explaining their current location more than once, he spoke to the entire group.

“Welcome to the Evans compound, everybody. We are currently located within the deepest recesses of Gringotts, inside the oldest vault in the entire bank. Dumbledore can say what he will about Hogwarts, but allow me to assure you that this is the single safest location in all of wizarding Britain. It isn't a vault so much as a complete stronghold. Inside this facility is all of the wealth that my mother's line has accumulated over centuries, much more than just gold and precious minerals. There is a library containing several tomes thought to be long lost to our world, a potions lab stocked with ingredients thought to be impossible to obtain. This place has a full practice facility and dining hall, and could easily be lived in. This is where we will be doing all of our training.”

“But your mother was a Muggleborn, and I've never heard of an Evans lineage regardless.”

Tracey Davis had been the one to make that comment. She was a Slytherin pureblood, and was therefore curious.

“That is the official story, that my mother was Muggleborn. She was a half-blood in actuality, with my grandfather being a Squib and my grandmother a Muggle. My maternal bloodline is somewhat complex, but I promise to explain it fully later on tonight. For now, since most of you still seem to be looking around anxiously, take the next hour to explore and satiate your curiosity. We'll be spending quite a bit of time here, so get comfortable with the place. The sealed chambers are closed off for a reason, and I would advise not tampering with the doors. Please don't take anything out of here without permission, as much of this stuff is both priceless and dangerous. Come to me with any questions you may have, and we'll meet up again in the dining hall and discuss what exactly we're going to be doing here and why.”

At that point, just about everybody disassembled and went to look around. Hermione and most of the Ravenclaws predictably went straight to the library, while Tracey and a few others went to check out the potions lab. Susan headed for the training center, while the Gryffindors seemed more interested in ogling Harry's gold. Su opted to follow Harry and Cho around, as they were the only people present that she knew and trusted. The young wizard led the two Chinese girls over to his treasure vault, where Ron and the twins were

currently staring at the huge piles of gold. Blaise and Daphne were also glancing about the stacked vault appreciatively, but not with the abject wonderment of the Weasleys. Blaise sauntered over and attached herself to Harry's free arm, as Cho continued to occupy the other.

"I knew you were well-off, Harry, but this is ridiculous. You're a Slytherin's dream come true. Handsome and powerful, not to mention good-natured and extremely rich. I do believe that I'm in love. All that gold makes you even sexier."

Harry grinned, turning her half-hearted declaration into a game. He knew that she was trying to get under Cho's skin, and hoped that lightening the mood would keep things from escalating. They were all here for a purpose, and a divisive catfight was the last thing he wanted to deal with at the moment.

"I am rather perfect, if I do say so myself. Thank you for noticing."

The voluptuous Italian girl grinned back and leaned her head onto Harry's shoulder in response, though the contact only lasted for a second before a jealous Cho wrenched him away from her. He allowed her to lead him off, as the small girl would never have been able to physically force him. Cho flipped her hair and smirked back at Blaise.

"Come on, Harry. I want to see the rest of your vault. Nice try, Zabini, but a dream is all he's ever going to be for you."

Blaise sneered in response.

"So the little Hogwarts popularity queen turns and runs away at the first sign of competition. Pretend all you like, Chang, but you know deep down that he's too much for you to handle."

"Think what you will. It doesn't matter, and I'll make sure you get an invitation to our wedding."

Harry raised an incredulous eyebrow at the mention of marriage, but said nothing.

“Don’t bother, I’ll invite myself. I’ll be the one servicing the groom while you’re off getting your dainty little nose pampered in the bridal chamber. I’m just telling you now so you’ll know what that strange taste in his mouth is when you seal your vows.”

“That is so disgusting. Harry, let’s go before I succumb to the urge to hex this harlot.”

Harry simply led her away without a word, shaking his head as Ron cheered him on for having two beautiful women at each other’s throats over him. The tall redhead then swore when Ginny slapped him on the back of the head. Blaise was beginning to turn into a serious hassle, but Harry knew somehow that he would need her in the future. He personally didn’t concern himself much beyond that. After all, he had been jealous enough to nearly be physically ill at having to see her with Cedric Diggory during his fourth year, so he had little sympathy for her being forced to take small taste of her own bitter medicine now. Su shadowed them out, and the three arrived back in the main hall of the complex. Harry’s arranged instructors were just arriving through the main entrance escorted by Grilthauk. Alberto and Fleur were there, anyway. Harry had yet to find anybody to do the self-defense training. Su had the talent, but was far too timid to be an effective teacher, and Harry didn’t want to burden Hitomi with additional responsibilities.

“You look a bit older now than you did the day we first met, boy. Your first real battle will do that.”

Harry was on the point of countering that he had been through several battles before, but realized that what Alberto had said was true. The raid on the train marked the first time that Harry had ever truly experienced the bloody horrors of war, and certainly the first time that he had ever intentionally taken another life.

“I think we’re all a bit older after that mess, Alberto. That’s why we’re all here today. Those bastards will never get the drop on us like that again. Anyway, I hope you haven’t been too bored since leaving your shop behind. By the way, the wand’s every bit as powerful as it looks. Really an unparalleled work of art.”

“Glad to hear it, and my whole life since being kicked off the force has been nothing but boredom. I took a trip back home to Mexico last week. Took a bit of our funds and greased a few palms in the wizard’s prison. The warden staged a jailbreak for me and freed one of the country’s most notorious banditos. He’s working for us now, him and his entire gang. I also rounded up a few of my old Auror buddies from back when I went to the academy in Acapulco. Brought back about thirty men in all.”

Harry knew that his army’s most glaring weakness at the present was its lack of actual wizards and witches. Aside from himself, Bill, Fleur and Alberto, and likely Remus whenever Harry got around to talking him over, they had none that were fully trained and ready for combat. Su perhaps also, but he wasn’t yet confident enough in her to send her up against Voldemort’s crack troops. He had hundreds of goblins and would hopefully have the Centaur of the Forbidden Forest soon, but human spellcasters were at the top of the wizarding world’s proverbial food chain for a reason. The Shinn Kohaku only barely qualified, as they tended not to directly use magic against the enemy. Alberto’s subverted Mexican Aurors and hired desperado gang would help fill that gap in Harry’s forces. He had no reservation about employing criminals in his army either, as he could keep them loyal simply by allowing them to plunder the enemy and Death Eaters didn’t deserve to be treated with any honor or dignity anyway.

“Excellent, I’m sure they’ll be most useful. Where are you keeping them?”

“The Aurors are staying in one of the ninja locations up in York, and the gang’s building a camp over in Ireland that we’ll keep under Fidelius.”

Harry nodded and glanced over to Grilthauk. The old goblin warrior looked much more haggard than usual. The strain of keeping all of these outside operations running smoothly in addition to his daily job of overseeing Gringotts was getting to him.

“You look like Hell, Grilthauk. Take a rest every now and then, for Merlin’s sake.”

"I only wish that I could, Harry. The amount of work to be done is staggering, and I am quite reluctant to delegate any of it to subordinates for fear that it will not be handled as effectively. Once this war is over, I can retire and rest to my old heart's content."

Harry was usually not all that inclined to order others around contrary to their own wishes, but felt it necessary to put his foot down here. The elderly chieftain was killing himself, and that would result in a severe drop in morale among the goblin ranks and effectively destroy the infrastructure behind all of his force's operations.

"We need you too much to let you keel over from exhaustion, and so do your own people. I'm telling you to allow yourself sufficient rest from now on. I'm sure that the others can perform some of the more routine operations just fine. Besides, we'll need people competent to keep things running here once we enter open combat and you're out leading your warriors. Best to let them have some practice now. First give me a quick rundown of our financial status and then go up to your quarters and get some sleep."

Grilthauk nodded with a toothy sneer.

"As you wish. Our incoming revenue is falling just short of our expenditures. As Bill has reportedly informed you, Gringotts is cooperating with the Ministry's seizures of private accounts belonging to known Death Eaters. However, ancient magical customs prevent us from taking assets that are the collective property of an entire ancestral line. Therefore, we cannot seize the entire Malfoy trust or something similar. Because of this, our actual income from this project is less than you might expect, especially since we can only skim so much from the top without the Ministry growing overtly suspicious. Thus far we have taken the personal holdings of Lucius Malfoy, Simon Goyle and Malcolm Nott. We have also seized the Rookwood family's assets in full. They do not rank among the old families, and so the meddlesome blood laws do not protect them. We are in the process of doing the same concerning Walden Macnair and Jermaine Jugson. On the other side of things, we have to spend heavily in order to outfit all of the goblin soldiers as well as fund our reconnaissance operations across magical Britain."

Harry was a bit irritated with the fact that they weren't going to be able to cripple Voldemort's finances as completely as he had hoped, but at least they were getting something.

"Dip into the Evans and Potter accounts if necessary. I'd rather not drain the Black fortunes unless left with no other alternative, given the number of people that stand under its umbrella. Also, have somebody make arrangements to outfit my student army with weapons and armor. We needn't go so far as to use arkanite or other priceless materials, but certainly dragonhide robes and boots for everybody, as well as some sort of enchanted armaments to protect the upper body. For the weapons, we'll let people decide on an individual basis. The costs can be absorbed directly from the Evans vault. We need this work to be done secretly, so employ craftsmen who are skilled but fall outside of the larger commercial sphere and will keep confidentiality. We'll schedule the initial fittings for two weeks from tonight."

"I shall see to it. Now if you will excuse me, I do believe that I am overdue for some much needed beauty rest."

Grilthauk hobbled away and back through the entrance from whence he had come. An amused Fleur made a comment.

"As I said back during 'ze summer...you are quite 'ze commander, 'Arry."

"And again, you'd better believe it. Thank you for doing this for us, by the way. I really appreciate it."

Fleur airily waved the comment away, but seemed pleased to hear it.

"It is no difficulty. 'Zink no'zing of it."

"Well then, perhaps we ought to get this business underway. Hopefully Bill will be coming with our potion here directly."

Harry didn't feel any need to wait for confirmation, trusting Bill to show up with his answer to Hermione's charmed DA parchment. With so much at stake, the penalty for betrayal was not so modest as a

brand on the forehead. The Draft of the Oath was a binding potion employed in royal knighthood ceremonies during medieval times when it was commonplace for a king to have a powerful wizard in his employ. It carried the ultimate penalty of an instant and painful death for any that even attempted to break faith. The formula for the potion was itself very obscure, and Harry doubted that even Snape would have ever seen it before. Two of the key ingredients were lost to the modern wizarding world, and only present in the ancestral vault's potions lab in a quantity barely sufficient to concoct this batch. Harry was placing a lot of faith in Bill's brewing abilities.

He led his small entourage into the dining hall, taking his place at the head of the great table. Cho took the secondary seat to his immediate right, Ron the third place on the left. Su fell in to Cho's other side, Hermione to Ron's, and the rest of the assembly continued assorting itself into a loose declination. Fleur opted to remain standing and took a place next to Harry's chair. She received a few lustful looks from the male contingent but seemed to be keeping her alluring aura mostly repressed. Alberto kept a position near the doorway. Once everybody was seated, Harry spoke up in his most commanding voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed friends. Some of you are already aware of the full purpose for which you have all been brought here this evening. For the rest, allow me to explain. The wizarding world is at war, and its continued survival is in jeopardy. Voldemort is the nearest and most visible threat, but not the only one. The Ministry of Magic is corrupt and pollutes society by appealing to its worst fears. Good men and women are held down by intrigues, and bribery and misappropriation are the order of the day. Cornelius Fudge and his party are self-serving, avaricious and bigoted beyond reason. They give the appearance of having changed their ways, but that is only an illusion. The Ministry denied Voldemort's return to power until the bitter end, and now he is back to his full strength. As a result, countless innocents will lose their lives."

Murmurs and nods from all across the table greeted Harry's brief pause. He let them die down before continuing. Even Susan Bones, whose aunt occupied a high position in the Ministry hierarchy, seemed to be in full agreement.

“Albus Dumbledore would claim to be our salvation. Some of you may not be aware of the fact that he leads a vigilante group called the Order of the Phoenix. Virtually all of the current Hogwarts staff is among its ranks, among others. And yet, many of you are not aware of the Order’s existence. That is because it does virtually nothing, a guard dog lacking claws or fangs. They wait for Voldemort to attack, and then come to the rescue after the battle has already been won. You all saw this just a few weeks ago when the train was assaulted. In those few minutes, our ragtag defense force did more damage to Voldemort’s war machine than Dumbledore and his cohorts have in nearly eighteen months. He is an incapable leader with no vision or strategy whatsoever. He is completely unwilling to stand aside in favor of one properly qualified to command. He refuses to fight back with lethal force and ignores the will of the people who want Voldemort and his wicked supporters slain. Incompetent as he is, even Fudge has seen the light on this issue. Dumbledore regards his ridiculous morals as being more precious than our lives. He cannot and will not banish the darkness that threatens to consume us. We must blaze the hallowed path ourselves.”

This frenzied response to this diatribe indicated that the anti-Dumbledore sentiment among the student body was still burning strong. All Harry needed to do was whip it back up to the surface.

“And that brings us to this evening. We are the best and brightest that our generation has to offer. We will train and prepare ourselves for the battle ahead. We will use every means available to us. No longer will the ridiculous notions that Dumbledore and his magical prejudices have ingrained into us for all these years continue to restrict us. I will teach you the Dark Arts personally and we will unleash deadly retribution onto those that would torture and kill us simply because of who we are or what we were born. Many of us have killed already, and the rest have at least witnessed it. This isn’t about improving our test scores or some petty defiance of the Ministry. It’s about fighting a war, and we won’t be alone. My combined forces are nearly five hundred soldiers strong and growing daily, comparable in size to both the Aurors and the Death Eaters.”

Harry again halted his oration and allowed his latest revelations to sink in. Not many knew that he had a legitimate force behind him, and he was sure that at least a few newcomers thought that this assembly was just going to be about continuing the DA without the old man's knowledge. Some were hesitant, though it didn't surprise him.

"I know that I'm asking you all to place an enormous amount of trust in me both as a fighter and as a leader, and perhaps it's time that I revealed the true story of my heritage. The tale begins nearly two hundred years ago..."

Harry went on to relate the full story behind the rise and fall of Lord Grindelwald, though in somewhat less painstaking detail than Grilthauk had all those months ago. He found it fitting that his friends would hear this in the very same complex that he himself had. Harry went out of his way to pontificate on the subject of Dumbledore's hypocrisy and lies and to lambaste the Ministry of Magic for its gross intolerance and shortsightedness. He finished his tale by describing the circumstances of his maternal grandfather's birth and his being hidden within the Muggle world for his own protection, opening up his robes and exposing his wings to exhibit his dakaathi heritage. Judging by his audience's facial expressions, they seemed to be taking the news fairly well. Blaise and her company looked to have even more respect for him upon hearing that he was a scion of such a great wizard while the Ravenclaws were reacting with neutral curiosity.

"Heir to the Great Grindelwald...that is so cool."

Harry smiled slightly at Daphne's reverent tone. Meanwhile, Bill came into the room carrying a silver cauldron filled with a shimmering golden potion. He was flanked by several goblins, each carrying a tray of matching drinking goblets.

"Yes, I am Lord Grindelwald sole heir. I will carry on his legacy and create the utopia that he lost his life pursuing, and I hope that you will all join me. Doing away with Voldemort is only the beginning. He and his ilk are only the visible symptoms of the disease that plagues our world. We must strike at the root of the evil, or else another Dark Lord just like him will inevitably crop up sooner or later. We will pull up the

corrupt husk of the Ministry by its roots and excise the festering cancer, and then shove that bumbling old fool out to pasture once and for all. We will create a new society fashioned in our image. The elder generation has failed, and it's our time now. Join me in my righteous crusade and take the future into your own hands. Bill, please bring the potion."

"Sure thing, Harry."

A few of the more inquisitive young wizards and witches in the room stood up and quickly looked into the cauldron as Bill crossed the room. Even the most diligent Potions students among the gathering were unable to recognize the mysterious brew, much to the chagrin of both Hermione and Tracey. The eldest Weasley son placed the cauldron down directly in front of Harry, and his goblin cohorts meticulously arranged their twenty combined goblets off to the sides. All eyes were directly on Harry.

"This potion, that I'm sure none of you have recognized, is an very rare and obscure concoction known as the Draft of the Oath. Those of you that have been particularly studious regarding History of Magic might have heard of it. It was used in knighthood ceremonies back around the time during which Hogwarts was founded. To be as succinct as possible, it is the most powerful binding potion in existence. Those of you that were in the DA last year will recall that we were betrayed. We all suffered due to Marietta Edgecombe's breach of faith, and I was very nearly expelled from school. If such a thing were to happen here, the consequences would be infinitely more serious. Our lives are all on the line here, and so the penalty for betrayal shall be the same. I will now add the final ingredient to the potion, a libation of my own lifeblood."

Harry looked back over to Bill, who nodded and produced a sharp ritual dagger from within his robes. Harry took the weapon and closed his eyes before making a quick slash across his left palm. He could feel the blood oozing out of the wound. Opening his eyes, he lowered his cut hand over the cauldron and allowed a sizable volume of his blood to cascade in. The potion glowed a brilliant gold and began boiling violently. Fleur quietly healed the wound on Harry's hand as

Bill ladled the completed Draft of the Oath into the individual goblets. The goblins took them up and placed one before each candidate.

“Now, your rite of initiation will consist of passing this infallible test of loyalty. You must each imbibe of the Draft of the Oath. In doing so, your magic will be bound to my own. My power will become yours, and your magical strength will thus be augmented should the potion deem you just and worthy. However, should your heart or mind be untrue, then my blood will turn into a deadly poison inside your body and you shall suffer a crippling and painful death right where you sit. The binding is forever, and to break faith in the future will bear the same penalty. Any among you who are having second thoughts, the time to rise and take your leave is now. Alberto will modify your memories accordingly and you will be returned to your dormitories in the castle none the worse for wear. But once you have taken the draught, there can be no turning back. Consider your options well, and those who remain will each drink the potion and swear their oath of fealty in half an hour’s time.”

Harry fully expected at least two or three people to get cold feet and back out. The time elapsed in silence, but not a soul stirred from his or her seat. He had once again underestimated those around him, as was in many ways his perennial failing. He had first doubted even Ron and Hermione, his truest friends, and everybody else as well. Fleur withdrew a stack of parchment slips from a small bag at her feet and passed them out to the seated gathering. Once that was done, Harry prepared to initiate the final portion of the evening’s proceedings. He had decided to postpone actual training exercises until the next gathering in order to allow the others to adapt a bit to the increase in magical power that would come as a result of the forthcoming ceremony.

“Now is the time for you each to swear the oath. We will go down in order of seated hierarchy. Cho, please stand and take the vow.”

Cho stood proudly, taking her goblet in hand. She had already memorized the oath. Her voice was soft, but still clear and powerful.

“Cho Ling Chang doth hereby swear everlasting fealty to the Lord of Evans. May his wishes be mine commands, and may my body rot

and my soul suffer for all eternity should I ever breach this vow. Let this libation be proof of my loyalty.”

Cho drained her goblet, obsidian eyes widening for a moment as Harry’s power began to flow into her. The degree of augmentation afforded by the ritual was directly proportional to the recipient’s emotional attachment to his or her sworn liege. The Chinese beauty’s was naturally very fierce and her power increased by a full doubling of its previous limit. She sat back down, mooning at Harry with flushed cheeks. Ron was the next to swear.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley doth hearby swear everlasting fealty to the Lord of Evans. May his wishes be mine commands, and may my body rot and my soul suffer for all eternity should I ever breach this vow. Let this libation be proof of my loyalty.”

Ron returned to his seat as well, smirking as he felt the tangible increase in his power. His attachment to Harry was that of a surrogate brother, strong but somewhat less powerful than Cho’s. His strength increased to a degree of about three-quarters of his existing maximum. Su took the oath after Ron, followed by Hermione and so on down the line. Those who felt closest to Harry made the greatest gains, the others in that category being Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville, and surprisingly Su and Blaise. Hermione experienced the same seventy-five percent power hike that Ron had, while the remainder gained about half. The next tier gained about a third of their own maxima, those being the likes of Katie, the twins, Susan, Daphne and Tracey. The rest gained more or less a quarter. All passed the test of loyalty and seemed a bit awed by the instantaneous spike in their magical potential. None of them stood anywhere near Harry’s strength level, though most had surpassed or at least reached the relative raw energy level of a competent adult wizard or witch.

“Congratulations, you have all passed the initial test. We will not train tonight, as your bodies will require a few days to fully adjust to your expanded powers. Just relax for now. I’m very proud of you all. Let us assemble again in three days’ time at the same time and place as tonight. We will train for two weeks, and then everybody will be fitted for weapons and protective armaments. Bill, please bottle up the

remainder of the Draft of the Oath. We may need to use it again later.”

Harry led his newly appointed vassals into the main entrance hall and made the collective return journey back onto the school grounds with Portkey. It was now well past curfew, though he didn't particularly care about getting caught out of bounds. He and the rest of the Gryffindors made the return trip to the dormitories in a pack and didn't come across any patrolling faculty members en route. Seamus and Dean were already fast asleep when they returned to their rooms. Harry quickly fell into a contented slumber, extremely pleased with the results of the evening's ceremonies.

The next full moon arrived less than a week later, and the time had arrived for Harry to meet with the Centaur elders. He entered the Forbidden Forest alone and unarmed. Hopefully the equine creatures would exhibit enough honors not to attack him, but he had his chaotic powers to obliterate them with should things come to open hostilities. His two pets caught up with him near the entrance, but he dismissed them. The Centaur had requested only Harry and that was exactly what they were going to receive. He walked down a trodden path that he imagined would lead to their settlement. The moonlight above illuminated the entire forest.

Remus was suffering through his transformation at that very moment, surely in cruel isolation at Grimmauld Place. Harry intended to owl the old werewolf in a few days and invite him to lunch for the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend. His connections within the lycanthropic community were potentially very important to his cause and he would much happier having the last remaining Marauder on his side. Harry didn't imagine that it would be too difficult to persuade Remus to defect. He would certainly honor Padfoot's last request, and there was really nothing left tying him to the old man. Having business with Remus would also assist Harry in evading having to suffer through whatever sugary romantic tripe that Cho might want to plan for them. He most definitely did not fancy making a return visit to Madam Puddifoot's. Shuddering at the memory, he spotted small band of Centaur led by one with a rich cream coat waiting on the path ahead.

“So you have come as requested, young warrior. Please follow us. The elders await.”

“By all means, lead the way.”

Harry walked along proudly behind the Centaur patrol. The path took several branching turns and finally led to what had to be their home. Harry quickly noted that Centaur architecture was rather crude. Their shelters consisted of little more than four poles speared into the ground with a pitched roof of pine needles providing cover. Twenty or thirty such dwellings were arranged in a wide circle, in the middle of which sat a large stone astrology chart. Harry could see several of them standing in a linear formation at the edge of this carved centerpiece. They looked quite a bit older than the other Centaur that Harry had come across throughout his five years at Hogwarts. Bane was there as well, but not as a member of the council. He stood guard brandishing a spear and addressed Harry as he arrived.

“So you have arrived safely, human foal. Stand before the elders and mind that you behave respectfully.”

Harry ignored Bane’s threatening tone, content with the knowledge that he was not strictly human and that he could easily slay the offensive creature in a matter of seconds should he feel so inclined. The Centaur in the middle of the council was larger than the others and looked a bit more wizened. Now able to gleam a closer look, Harry realized that he had never met any of this gathering before, aside from the silver-maned Magorian. The leader spoke up in a conciliatory tone. The old Centaur’s coat was a stone gray and he bore a curse scar similar to Harry’s over his left eye.

“Greetings, Harry Potter. I am Tilu, chief elder of the Forbidden Forest herd. It is good to see that you have arrived without incident. These forests are becoming increasingly unsafe recently, even for our own kind. Nevertheless, we are honored to have you.”

Harry knew that the Centaur were a proud race and were easily offended. He would have to pocket his own pride somewhat and be extremely deferential or else this meeting would have no chance of accomplishing anything. He made a humble obeisance before the council.

“By all accounts I am the one who should be honored, venerable elder. This ignorant human would be eternally grateful would you and your esteemed colleagues condescend to favor him with the privilege of your instruction.”

Tilu and the other elders nodded approvingly.

“The stars have exhibited several strange behaviors in recent months. Heaven’s movements have centered around one single star. Realize that important figures within our world often have corresponding celestial bodies. As it happens, our ascendant star happens to be your own. The planets favor you, young foal.”

Harry liked the sound of that. His apparently being at the center of celestial developments made him feel all that much more assured of his eventual victory. His curiosity demanded to hear the specifics.

“Please explain to me, wise ones. I cannot comprehend the stars without your assistance.”

Another of the elders spoke up. This one had a flaming red coat.

“The stars of destiny are aligning around your own. This shows that you have heaven’s mandate. Venus favors you as well, reflecting light from both the sun and the moon into your star’s orbit. Never before have we observed such an odd phenomenon.”

Magorian continued with the explanation.

“Mars burns brighter than we have ever seen before and waxes greater with each passing night. A conflict the likes of which our secluded magical world has never before witnessed looms close on the horizon. Your star’s ascendancy corresponds with this ominous tiding. The stars are seldom this forthcoming in their implications. There is little doubt that you are fated to stand directly at the center of this approaching upheaval.”

Harry already knew that he was going to be in the thick of things, but the news that stars prophesied that the battle would be so great was unnerving. Surely many people would perish, and inevitably those

who he wished to protect would be among them. He was much too occupied with pondering these celestial missives to add anything.

Tilu picked up again with a soothing tone.

“Indeed an unsettling portent, but what we find most curious is the fact that even mighty Jupiter deigns to favor your star. The king of the stars has been waning into decline for many generations, only to resurge into prominence in these recent months. Jupiter’s light corresponds to reign, young foal. Its alignment postulates that you will soon ascend to the gilded throne. This corresponds directly with Saturn’s current decline. Saturn was lord of the titans and the father of Jupiter. As time passed the latter rallied his siblings to overthrow his father and the other titans in a great war, thereby becoming the supreme ruler of the known universe. In this Roman mythological fashion, the decadent falter and the righteous ascend in their place. I hope that this has helped you to gain a greater understanding. You enjoy heaven’s favor and thus need not fear the outcome of this war.”

This revelation validated his earlier optimism. Saturn’s decline represented the fall of the old order, that much was certain. Harry was unsure as to whom exactly that meant. Perhaps it was Dumbledore. Harry had once looked to him as a sort of surrogate grandfather. It could also mean Voldemort, who certainly ranked as Harry’s especial nemesis. In that case, perhaps Harry was fated to slay the current Dark Lord and simply pick up where the other had left off. The most likely scenario was that it signified the collapse of the corrupt Ministry of Magic and the creation of a new order under Harry’s dominion. But despite how generally agreeable it sounded, he wasn’t willing to put too much stock into what the Centaur had postulated. Predictions were only predictions. Harry certainly wasn’t going to fall into the same strategic quagmire as the old man.

“Your interpretations have been most enlightening. You have my gratitude.”

“And now, let us discuss the true motivation behind your being requested here this evening. The herd wishes to negotiate the terms of an alliance.”

Harry had known before coming that this was the reason behind his being summoned.

“Of course, but it surprises me that you would be willing to consider such a thing. The Centaur have always remained strictly aloof and neutral in the past, and I am quite interested in knowing what has made the council reconsider that position.”

Magorian gave the response.

“Our prerogatives have always been to observe celestial motions and act according to the will of the heavens. Human secular matters are none of our affair. However, the planets have acknowledged you as the chosen one. We are the children of the stars, Harry Potter. They have dictated and we are obliged to obey. Allow us to add our strength to yours.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. He could simply accept outright, but he felt somewhat obliged to give something back.

“Just a moment ago you mentioned wanting to discuss terms. I will certainly accept the herd’s assistance with abject gratitude should it be offered. If you have any requests for me please do not neglect to mention them. I will gladly compensate the herd for its generous proposal as handsomely as it is within my considerable power to do.”

Tilu picked up in that vein with a smile.

“We do not wish to leave our forests. This is our home and we cannot bear to stray from it. Our offer is one of defensive support. Eventually the evil plaguing your world will come to these grounds. Lord Voldemort’s followers have already infiltrated these trees once in an attempt to spread sedition among the various races here and lay the groundwork for an eventual assault on Hogwarts. When that time comes, the herd will fight alongside your forces to purge the darkness and fulfill heaven’s will. In the meantime we will keep a vigilant watch over these woods, killing any unwelcome visitors and driving away any denizens that would join hands with the evil. In return, we would ask that our forests be officially ceded by the school once you are victorious in this war.”

Harry had always thought that Voldemort was too terrified of the old man to even consider a direct siege upon the school. It was a ridiculous notion regardless. The wards around the castle were nigh impenetrable. Sneaking an operative in to spy or whatnot was one matter, but it was entirely another to lead an army into a pitched battle. Still, the serpentine psychopath could pump up his numbers high enough and gain such an advantage that the insane plan could actually be successful. Having the Centaur keeping a watchful eye over the most vulnerable area of the grounds was a prudent measure, and meeting their terms would be no difficulty when the time came.

“That seems reasonable enough. I accept your terms.”

“Then it is done. The escort that showed you here will see you back to the forest entrance. It would not do for our honored guest to be attacked on our watch. Fare thee well, young avatar of the planets. Until next we meet, we will observe your progress closely.”

All of the herd’s council of elders made the same obeisance that Harry had made earlier, followed by the escort troop. Even haughty Bane sank to his front knees respectfully. Harry returned the gesture and allowed himself to be led from the village. His venture had been a relative success. He was not able to secure the Centaur as active participants in the coming upheaval, but he had at least managed to obtain a promise of support in the event of an assault upon the school. He was satisfied, if not outright pleased with the arrangement. His next project would be to ask Remus to secure him a meeting with the werewolf packs. Harry had a plan there that would really upset Voldemort’s apple cart.

Harry slept well that night and made it to breakfast early the next morning, intending to owl Remus as soon as possible. He only barely paid attention when Dumbledore rose and announced that there would be a Ministry Ball held on Halloween night in honor of those who had fought in the defense of the Hogwarts Express. The entire event would take the better part of the day, as there would be a formal ceremony for handing out the Order of Merlin to each of them in the early afternoon, followed by dinner and dancing well into the night. Harry was most concerned with how it would affect his plans to confront Voldemort in Hogsmeade. He was likely to be touted as the

guest of honor, so there was little hope of him getting out of attending. He would just have to hopefully return with at least an hour to spare before the stroke of midnight and deal as best as he could.

His unit's training was progressing well. Harry had worked out a schedule that had them assembling and taking the Portkey to the Evans vault four nights out of the week. The training sessions lasted five hours, from roughly seven in the evening until midnight. One night was dedicated solely to Dark Arts instruction, which Harry took charge of personally. They went over spell theory and practiced on the dummies in the dueling room. Half of the second night was devoted to Healing Magic with Fleur, and the other half to battle tactics and group dueling with Alberto. Moody went over the same material to a certain degree in his classes, but Alberto did it on a much more advanced level and with more time devoted to practical application. The third night was devoted to physical exercise and basic martial arts. Harry had asked Kenzo to do take charge of this aspect of the training. The old village leader was ecstatic to have something productive to do during one night of the week and was a natural instructor. The arrangement also gave Harry a convenient excuse to stay and spend the night with Hitomi after escorting her grandfather home. The final night was dedicated to independent study, as each of his vassals had certain personal talents or areas in which they needed extra work and they could use the facility's extensive resources to develop them.

Harry was absentmindedly occupied with picking at his sausages and hash browns when a beautiful tawny owl landed on the table in front of him. The envelope that it carried was gold with violet bordering and closed with a formal seal. Harry took it gently and caught Cho's eye over at the Ravenclaw Table. A surprised and frantic expression formed on her beautiful features as she glimpsed his mail from her seat across the Great Hall. He didn't have time to open and read it. She flew out of her seat like a rocket and practically ran over to him, clamping down on his wrist in an attempt to pull him to his feet. She snatched the envelope with her other hand.

"Come with me, Harry. This is very important."

Harry saw no point in arguing and went without making any more of a scene than she already had. He endured a few taunts from Malfoy and company on the way out, mockingly theorizing that Cho was the one wearing the trousers in their relationship. She led him into an abandoned classroom and sat the envelope down on the table at the front. Cho just looked at the golden article with a pained expression for several minutes. Harry finally became a bit irritated.

“What’s gotten into you this morning, Cho? It’s just a letter.”

Her eyes snapped over to him.

“I know the owl that delivered it. This envelope is from my father, and this type of seal is only used for one purpose in our family. I never wanted to believe that he would do this.”

“Whatever it is, it can’t be that big of a deal. Calm down before you have an anxiety attack.”

She didn’t seem to be paying him much attention, looking like an emotional wreck.

“I am so sorry about this, Harry. My father just won’t stop interfering in my life.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Start by telling me what’s in the envelope. You’re a Ravenclaw, for Merlin’s sake. Get a bloody grip on yourself already.”

Cho exhaled audibly and looked at Harry sympathetically.

“I had thought that you might have figured it out already. Harry, this is a formal marriage proposal.”

(End Chapter Twenty)

Author’s Note: I am devilishly evil, leaving you all with a cliffhanger like that. I can hear the Cho haters taking up arms already. I’ve already decided what I’m going to do about the proposal. Comment if

you like, but the path is set. Unless of course I change my mind. Not a whole lot of action or real plot advancement here, but there's enough for you all to start thinking about. I will say now that the rite of fealty and the vassals drinking a potion containing Harry's blood is not going to give them demonic powers or turn them into dakaathi hybrids. The ceremony is very different from the one that resurrected Voldemort, as Harry's blood isn't being permanently assimilated into their genetic structures as it was with old snakeface. Don't worry about them becoming super powerful either. All the power increases have done is put them on a level where they can compete with adult spellcasters without being totally ripped apart. None of Harry's student vassals are going to make sport of the likes of a Snape or a Bellatrix or a Moody or a Lucius Malfoy, to say nothing of the real powers in the war such as Dumbledore or Voldemort. It would be very much the opposite. They still lack both the power and the experience to take on the powerful foes. However, they will be able to handle the rank and file without too much trouble.

Next chapter is going to have Harry laying his plans for the Halloween battle. There will likely also be some steamy stuff when he finally gets Cho into the bedroom. I've starved my more ecchi-minded readers for long enough, I think. Well, not really. It's only been two chapters since his last tryst with Hitomi. And just so people stop asking, yes he will finish his business with Blaise and company at some point. We're only two chapters away from Harry's next huge combat, and that battle on the fifteenth anniversary of his parents' deaths will be one to remember. Hope you all like the update, and please review.

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Chapter Twenty-One: Wedding and Werewolves – Corrupting the Innocent

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry met her concerned visage with a raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t know that people did written marriage contracts these days. How very medieval. Regardless, you make it sound as if this is unpleasant news.”

Cho stared at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Unpleasant is an understatement, Harry. I’m not even eighteen yet, and you’re younger still. It’s too soon for us to even think about marriage.”

“But you’re the one that brought it up first. I’d think you would be pleased.”

“If you’re talking about that rot I said to Zabini the other night, you know full well that I was only trying to rile that bitch up.”

Harry was indeed fully aware of that fact and had only been trying to lighten the mood a little. He was torn on what to do about the offer. He would certainly at least read it, but didn’t exactly fancy the idea of Cho being essentially given to him like a piece of property. She

deserved better than that. On the other hand, he intended to wed her at some point in the foreseeable future regardless, and accepting her father's proposal would assist in procuring the influential Liangshan Alley wizard's loyalty at the same time. It really did represent the proverbial scenario of killing two birds with one stone. The question was whether or not he could potentially compromise her happiness for the sake of political advantage. Perhaps he could talk her around and thus win on all fronts.

"Yeah, I know. But still, it's a commitment that I'm ready and willing to make."

The beautiful Chinese girl's stare turned from incredulous to suspicious immediately.

"We've been dating for barely a month, Harry. You've never even actually asked me to be your girlfriend. I find it hard to believe that you're honestly prepared to marry me."

Harry inclined his head with a smile. He gently drew her into him by her slim shoulders.

"I've spent my entire adolescent life chasing after you. Of course I've thought about this before. I used to stay up at night when I was a bit younger and dream about what things would be like when we finally got together. I'm not really barmy about the whole written contract thing either, but it's irrelevant as long as we both genuinely want to be together. I am completely prepared to marry you. I've finally caught my butterfly and I'm not ever going to let her slip through my fingers again."

Cho looked annoyed and exasperated.

"I don't think you fully understand what's happening here. My father doesn't care about our happiness. He's trying to use us as a stepping stone to further his own prestige. He wants to secure his place in the history books by bringing Liangshan Alley out into the general wizarding community. This marriage is just a means to that end."

Harry agreed with her assessment to a point. Song Chang was a rather slippery and ambitious character, cut much from the same mold as Lucius Malfoy. The main difference being that the former's goal's were far more altruistic and less criminal than the imprisoned Death Eater's. However, that savvy was exactly what made Cho's father such a potentially useful ally. Harry had little to worry about from the man regardless. It wasn't as if they were going to be crossing swords, and the dakaathi hybrid could dispose of him easily even if they somehow did.

"I don't really care what ulterior motives he might have, and neither should you. Let him pursue his own schemes if he likes. Once our wedding has taken place, you'll never have to worry about being drawn into his plans again. Like I said before, I'm going to make you a queen. Once this is all over, your father will just be another one of our subjects."

Cho nodded with a feral smile, nuzzling into Harry.

"Okay, fine then. I've played the role of the obedient daughter for nearly eighteen years now. I can bear it a few months longer. You're a much more suitable mate than some obnoxious son of a Death Eater that my father would have tried to saddle me with should this arrangement have fallen through. And then once we've taken over, maybe I can force him to dance like a marionette for a little while. Just be a good husband to me, Harry."

Harry planted a kiss on her temple with a complimentary laconic grin.

"But of course, Queen Cho."

Cho appeared thoughtful for a moment and then shook her head in the negative.

"I think Empress Cho has a much better ring to it. Most magical governments across the globe are every bit as corrupt and useless as Britain's. Simply stopping with this takeover would be doing an incomplete job. You're good enough to rule the entire magical world."

Harry had to admit that styling himself an emperor was tempting. He hadn't really considered the global implications of his impending revolution. Now that he thought about it, it didn't seem likely that foreign magical governments would take kindly to what he was planning to do. Perhaps it would be prudent to plan for making this an international effort. For the moment, he was most surprised at the ambitious tone in Cho's voice. He hadn't heard anything like it until now.

"I offer you a kingdom and you push for an empire. You're such a vicious woman, trying to cajole me into becoming a warmonger. There's definitely some deviousness lurking underneath that kind and sweet disposition that you exhibit to the world. It must be that you resent your father simply because you're both exactly alike deep down."

Cho flashed a mock scowl and bopped him playfully on the side of the head.

"I am nothing like my father. I prefer to think of it as a result of your influence. I want only for my future husband to be the absolute best that he can be. As for my hidden devilish side, a girl is always entitled to keep some things to herself. But a married couple should share everything, so there can be no secrets between us now. Don't worry, I'll still be the perfect princess out in public."

Harry still had his one big secret. This whole marriage was nice, but he still had to factor in Hitomi. He was unwilling to give her up, nor would she ever let him go without a fight. He could probably get away with marrying both women given how generally archaic wizarding customs tended to be, especially for invested pureblood aristocrats such as himself. Hermione would surely know details, but he couldn't just ask her. The overly ethical witch would only fume at him for considering such questionable ideas as contracted marriages and polygamy. Perhaps it was time for him to break out that book from Bill. At any rate, he could do whatever he wished regarding the matter once he had completed his takeover, though he couldn't see Hitomi remaining patient for that long.

“You do that. Let’s see just what exactly daddy dearest is going to offer me in exchange for taking on his beautiful daughter. It almost seems unfair to the poor man. He’s quite literally paying me to steal away his most priceless treasure.”

Cho voiced no opposition despite the fact that they were both missing class, so Harry picked the gold envelope up off the front desk and opened it. Harry scowled upon seeing that the entire document was written in Chinese. There were spells that could translate text between different languages but the accuracy of their results was sketchy at best when used with two languages as drastically different as English and Chinese. Cho’s father apparently intended for her to have to interpret the document for Harry. It was a rather subtle means of ensuring that she would be willing to go through with the wedding before he could confirm the match. If he hadn’t known better, Harry would have thought that the man was acting for the sake of his daughter’s happiness. The fact of the matter was that it would have meant a great embarrassment for the entire Chang family if the young wizard were to accept the proposal only to have Cho then refuse to marry him. She seemed to understand the implication as well.

“Rather slick of him, I must say. He would never actually just ask for my approval.”

Harry shrugged, not caring to think of anything pertinent to say in response.

“Let’s hear the particulars, then.”

“Don’t be impatient, Harry. Give me a minute to read it over first.”

She took a few minutes to peruse the document, eyes widening as she took in the terms. Cho’s father was offering Harry an exorbitant dowry to accompany her, though no actual coin. He seemed to be cognizant of the fact that the young wizard had little use for more gold given the huge amount that he already possessed. Harry was instead being offered substantial interest in several of the Chang family’s business holdings both in Liangshan Alley and in mainland China, which included control over the distribution of ginseng being imported into Britain from overseas. As the herb was a key ingredient in many

healing brews, this represented a surprisingly potent political tool. Not that Harry was aware of the fact, as his knowledge concerning potions was atrocious. He would also be gifted a house in the upscale sector of Liangshan Alley as well as a flat in the wizarding block of Hong Kong. But the last part was the most important to Harry. In exchange for the young hero's marrying Cho, all of the Chang family's assets as well as the wands and lives of their various clients and supporters would be pledged to assist in the fight against Voldemort.

"Quite the generous offer, especially the promise of military aid."

Cho nodded weakly.

"He's taking a huge gamble by interjecting the family into this war. My father seems almost fanatically driven to push this marriage through regardless of the cost. A dowry of this size is completely unheard of."

"I suppose I ought to reply with my acceptance, unless you object for any reason."

"My parents are going to both be at the Ministry Ball on Halloween. The letter says that my father wants to hear your answer then. So there's time to reconsider, just in case you decide later that being married to a jealous shrew like me is too much for you to bear."

Harry smirked at her casual mention of her horrible attitude the previous year.

"Meaning that your father intends to make a big public spectacle of announcing the fact that the Boy-Who-Lived is betrothed to his daughter to the entire wizarding world. That somehow fails to surprise me. I'll bet he's already drooling at the prospect of rubbing elbows with all of those corrupt Ministry politicians."

Cho rolled her eyes.

"That pretty much sounds like him, yeah. As much as I'd love to sit here and pass the entire morning verbally abusing my father, I'm

already quite late for Ancient Runes. Do be a dear and walk your fiancée to class, Harry.”

Harry had completely forgotten about classes in his preoccupation with Song Chang’s marriage proposal and was likewise tardy for Charms. That being the case, he decided simply to skive off the lesson altogether. He needed to go and compose that owl to Remus, as the Hogsmeade visit was less than a week away and he would have no other opportunities to speak with the werewolf removed from Dumbledore’s peering eyes for a good while if he missed it. He could spare enough time to escort Cho to class first.

“Sure, let’s go.”

Cho took his arm happily.

“After you, Emperor Potter.”

Harry chuckled as the couple left the nondescript classroom. His advantage in this ongoing war was growing steadily with each passing day. Once the moment finally came for him to strike, he would wipe all of his foes clean with one glorious crushing blow.

The Owlery was unsurprisingly empty when he arrived. Hedwig was quite happy to take his scribbled note to Lupin. They would hopefully meet for a late lunch at the Hog’s Head. He chose the dingy pub due to the fact that Remus would no doubt be reluctant to mingle among the larger Hogwarts crowd that would invariably be assembled at The Three Broomsticks. The lycanthrope was still sensitive about Snape having revealed his condition to the entire student body. Harry snarled inwardly at the thought of the greasy bastard. He had much bigger issues than Snape at the moment, but one of Harry’s first acts upon taking over would be to have the man publicly executed. Assuming that he did nothing to provoke Harry to the point of killing him prematurely, of course.

As he departed downstairs, Harry mused on his classroom experiences over the last few weeks. Not even Dumbledore had been able to make heads or tails of the dilemma surrounding Harry’s phantom Animagus form. Neither had Alphonse’s books shed any

light onto its possible identity. Harry somehow knew deep within that the great bird resided within the demonic realm, leading to the conclusion that his great-grandfather's research was not entirely complete. McGonagall believed that the beast's spirit was so powerful that it could not be invoked under normal circumstances, and that the full contact would be established when it was truly needed. In the meantime, Harry opted to abandon the study within the classroom and focus on dueling transfigurations with the majority of the class. Only Hermione and Blaise along with a few Ravenclaws chose to continue studying Animagus theory, and there was no guarantee that any would be successful with it.

He was making better progress in other classes. He could repress his aura much more effectively thanks to Hitomi's instruction and was much better with a sword than in the past due to Bashilov's. The Slavic hulk had abandoned his dislike of Harry for the most part upon seeing that he was genuinely tough and willing to get his hands dirty. Hagrid's class was a total waste of his time. Though the half-giant tried his best to make things interesting, learning about how to care for pets simply wasn't high on Harry's personal list of priorities. Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms weren't much better. Moody's lectures on Auror battle tactics were helpful, but Harry's practical dueling skills were on such a higher plane than those of his classmates that he honestly gained very little from the lessons on the whole.

An annoyingly familiar voice halted his reflections when he crossed the threshold from the stairs into a corridor.

"Harry, my boy. Unless I am mistaken, you are supposed to be in class."

Harry barely repressed a scowl as he turned to meet the twinkling gaze of Albus Dumbledore. He instead affixed a conciliatory smile onto his face.

"I'm quite sure that you noticed my rather forced exit from the Great Hall this morning. Some rather heavy business has suddenly sprung up and I find simply myself a bit too absorbed in thought to sit through class lecture at the moment."

Dumbledore only nodded jovially.

“I must admit that the sight of Miss Chang dragging you from your morning meal made for quite an amusing scene. An absolutely splendid young lady, if an old man may be so bold. Much like your father, you exhibit impeccable taste regarding the fairer sex. And I daresay that she has made matters no easier on you than your mother did on him.”

Harry's smile deepened ever so slightly despite himself. For some reason he felt inclined to share the news with the wizard whom he had once regarded as a surrogate grandfather.

“I have certainly been after her for long enough. We are to be married soon. The official announcement will likely take place at the Ministry Ball on Halloween.”

The old man visibly brightened at the revelation, as if it had summarily quelled some fear that was rooted firmly within his heart. Harry concluded that Dumbledore had been terrified that he was turning to the dark and that the idea of him apparently falling head over heels for the sweet and demure Head Girl contradicted the notion entirely. He had to fight down the urge to snort. As if he were so two-dimensional. Nor did the wizened sage have any inkling of the treachery that lurked deep within the beautiful Ravenclaw. Dumbledore's blind faith in the so-called power of love was sickening. Harry's intuition had proven fruitful. The old man took him by the hands with a beaming smile.

“That is absolutely wonderful news, Harry. Marriage is an enormous commitment, though I have no doubts at this point that you are mature enough to make it. Now then, as seem to be free for the remainder of the day and I have been meaning to speak with you for several weeks now, let us retire to my office for a cup of tea.”

Harry could hardly refuse and reluctantly followed Dumbledore to his office. The gargoyle leapt aside without the password, assumedly recognizing the old man. Harry took a seat in the same armchair that he had occupied the last time he had visited the room, when he had

steadfastly refused to join the Order nearly a month ago. Dumbledore poured him a cup of tea from a pot on his desk as Fawkes napped on his perch. Harry drank without hesitation, confident that the old man's convoluted morality would prevent him from spiking the beverage with a truth serum or something similarly underhanded. The headmaster was too honorable to try anything beyond a Legilimency scan. The tea was flavored with raspberry. Harry looked from the glass to the old man, taking care to avoid eye contact.

"Raspberry tea. You really do have too much of a sweet tooth for a man your age."

Albus raised his teacup.

"Ah, this tea is a courtesy gift from Professor Kurahama. I thought that I might sample it today. You appear to be her favorite student, as it happens. She constantly boasted about your progress in her class at the last staff meeting. A lovely woman, it really is a pity that she spends so little time inside the castle. But enough of this old man's ramblings. You seem to have been keeping yourself rather occupied thus far this term..."

Dumbledore trailed off with that remark, obviously entreating Harry to explain. He supposed that it was too much to hope for that the old man would not have been aware of his frequent departures from the school over the course of the last month or so.

"I am at the head of three families, sir. I have countless obligations to attend to. I am doing my best to balance my outside responsibilities with my schooling here, but it's proving to be a rather difficult undertaking."

Albus shook his head in obvious disappointment, the twinkle in his eyes dying a bit.

"Harry, your parents' bloodlines are nonexistent now save for yourself and the Black family's daily operations are handled by others. None of the Order's operatives within the Ministry of Magic have ever so much as seen you within the building so far this year. It is not my desire to accuse you of wrongdoing but please do not lie to me."

Harry realized that he was cornered and would have to reveal some more of the truth in order to stave off further suspicion. Things were only now beginning to gel together and having all of his plans becoming known would ruin all. Perhaps sharing some of his intelligence on Voldemort would do the trick. Letting the old man in on the information now did no damage to Harry's cause, after all.

"I ought to have known that you weren't just looking for a simple chat. Since you insist, I have been working independently to keep tabs on what Voldemort has been up to lately. Don't ask for my sources, because I won't reveal them. Suffice to say that I have never shared your unwavering faith in Snape's loyalties. My people have supposedly managed to uncover the locations of a few of his strongholds across the British Isles. I also know that he is recruiting heavily overseas in an attempt to replace the forces that we destroyed back during the train attack. He also intends to make a direct attack on Azkaban in the near future. Many of my excursions from the grounds have been to set up a network of contacts and to persuade neutral parties not to join or support him."

Dumbledore steeped his hands, closing his eyes for a moment. Harry decided to keep the impending attack on Hogsmeade to himself. Not even his own people knew about what was going down that night, and he certainly wasn't telling Dumbledore.

"Professor Snape has proven to be true time and again, Harry. Your antipathy for him clouds your better judgment. He has reported on Voldemort's overseas exploits, particularly in Eastern Europe and among prominent vampire clans. The Order is doing its best to stymie those efforts, but a lack of suitable operative in those regions is making matters difficult. We are also aware of his plans for Azkaban, though Kingsley reports that the Minister has personally increased the guard already. I would venture to guess that you took the liberty of informing him. I strongly disapprove of your newfound relationship with Cornelius Fudge, but it has nonetheless proven helpful in this particular instance. He would never have taken my counsel on the matter to heart."

Dumbledore didn't even mention wanting to see Harry's information concerning Voldemort's facilities, which the young wizard took as further proof that the old man had no plans of ever prosecuting an offensive war. He was still plodding along in an attempt to simply hold out until Harry fulfilled the Prophecy.

"Disapprove all you like, but he's still the Minister for Magic. He's surging on a wave of popularity at the moment by riding the hem of my robes and he literally couldn't be blasted out of office. Somebody has to be able to deal with him and he has too much of an inferiority complex to ever cooperate with you. Regardless of that, he seems to finally be doing some things right as far as this war is concerned."

Albus nodded again.

"There is some logic behind your words. However, what concerns me the most is that you have been repeatedly observed Portkeying several of your fellow students from the grounds at night in recent weeks. I would like to hear an explanation."

Harry shook his head, blowing a wisp of hair from his forehead in annoyance.

"Extra practice in self-defense. As I told you during our last little chat, there are those among the student body that will invariably follow me into battle. I am sparing no effort in ensuring that they will be as fully prepared as possible for what awaits them. The emphasis that you have instructed to be placed upon dueling technique in all of our core classes has been most helpful, but it still doesn't cover all of the bases. The Minister upon request authorized a permanent Portkey for my personal use which has been utilized to ferry us to and from one of my holdings that is properly equipped for practical training. The Room of Requirement has been compromised due to last year's Inquisitorial Squad fiasco with Umbridge and her Slytherin cronies and is not a workable option, and nowhere else on the premises possesses the facilities that we require."

Dumbledore didn't seem pleased but declined to push the issue, having learned from his previous mistake of levying accusations towards Harry without any solid evidence. The old man's

unwillingness to alienate Harry any more than he already had was making it easier for the young wizard to get away with things. The heavy subjects addressed, Albus contented himself with making small talk with Harry for a while longer, until the approaching lunch hour gave the latter an excuse to get away. All said and done, the two powerful wizards parted under much more amicable terms than they had during their last meeting. Harry was still determined to force the old man from his pedestal if need be, but there was no point in being hostile to him until then.

The remainder of the week passed without any noteworthy incident, and Harry now found himself strolling towards the Hog's Head for his luncheon with Remus. He had been able to avoid Madam Puddifoot's after all, but Cho had dragged him around the village shopping all morning instead. Ron had finally mustered up the courage to ask Hermione on a date, which she gladly accepted. A miraculous victory for the Cannons over the Tornados financed the outing at Cho's grudging expense. The Chinese beauty rather blatantly hinted at her upcoming eighteenth birthday as she and Harry pored over racing brooms at the local Quidditch supply store. He had told her days in advance that he was making plans to meet the old werewolf, and she had consequently arranged to spend some time with her friends during the afternoon. He got the distinct feeling that she disliked the filthy establishment. A pair of soft hands covered his eyes when he passed by the Shrieking Shack.

"Guess who."

Harry smirked, easily recognizing the husky whisper.

"Good morning, Professor. Shouldn't you be back in the throngs chaperoning the students?"

Hitomi moved her hands from his eyes and rested one on Harry's shoulder. She was dressed a bit more conservatively than usual, abandoning her tight training suit in favor of a pretty electric blue kimono with pink embroidery. It was cut rather low, though, showing off the kunoichi's shapely thighs. She wasn't nearly as flirtatious as when they were alone, keeping in mind that when out in public she was a Hogwarts staff member and he was one of her students.

“But I am. Somebody has to keep you out of trouble. This is seriously out of the way. If you really wanted to escape the crowds, you ought to have just gone to my house or something. I’m sure we could have found something fun to do.”

The kunoichi paired the last remark with a suggestive wink.

“I’m meeting somebody for lunch at the Hog’s Head in a few minutes. He’s the one that doesn’t really like being around masses of people.”

“I think I’ll invite myself to join you, then. It certainly beats being ogled by a bunch of hormonal little boys. Even worse than them, I caught Snape staring at my breasts during a staff meeting a few weeks back. I preferred it when he was lusting after you.”

Harry wasn’t pleased with the idea of that greasy git making eyes at his woman. Petty jealousy was beneath him, but that was just revolting. Even the dirtiest trollops in Knockturn Alley were too clean for the likes of Severus Snape. Harry jokingly resolved to send the man a memory of the young wizard fucking the ninja girl if he ever attempted to use Legilimency against him again. The pair entered the Hog’s Head and spotted Lupin staring disconsolately down a glass of Gillywater at the bar. The werewolf still dressed in shabby robes despite being willed a large sum of gold from Sirius. Harry made his way over and sat down at an adjacent stool, Hitomi following behind.

“You look like shit, Moony.”

Remus snapped his head up and gazed at the grinning Harry.

“I feel like it, cub. Have a seat. I see you’ve brought company.”

Hitomi sauntered forward and shook the lycanthrope’s hand.

“I’m the Magical Stealth and Tracking instructor at Hogwarts. Harry’s one of my best students. I just saw him heading this way and decided to tag along.”

“Remus Lupin, an old friend of his dad’s.”

Harry ordered a Firewhiskey from the scruffy barkeep, the smelly and unpleasant old man that for some odd reason reminded Harry of Dumbledore. He got his drink without even a mention of his age. Hitomi asked for a bottle of sake, which the establishment surprisingly had in stock. Harry turned back to Lupin.

“Now that we’re all introduced, mind telling me what has you so down in the dumps?”

Lupin sighed and looked into Harry’s eyes, speaking in a quiet tone of voice.

“Just about everything. I’m not happy with what I’m doing with my life. The whole wizarding world is now mobilizing against Voldemort, yet the Order continues to do next to nothing. Some of the most potent wands in all of the British Isles are sitting idle because of some misplaced loyalty to Dumbledore and blind faith in his judgment. I’m so proud of you for telling him to stick it when he tried to pressure you into joining, Harry. Padfoot would have been too. I want revenge for your parents and Sirius, but I have nowhere to go due to my condition. The Ministry would never accept me and there’s nothing I can do on my own. I’m quite literally stuck with the Order.”

Harry could sense somebody watching them intently from a far table. It was likely a member of the Order. They were patrolling all over Hogsmeade that day alongside the school faculty. Dumbledore seemed determined not to be caught unprepared again, though Harry believed it to be inevitable. At any rate, he couldn’t talk seriously with Remus while they were being eavesdropped upon. He shared a glance with Hitomi, who picked up his vibe and spoke in a louder voice.

“Yes, we just made some new stock in over at the store. Come and take a look. Your friend looks like he could use some new robes as well. We can all grab a bite to eat up in my grandpa’s flat instead.”

“Sounds good to me. Come on, Moony.”

A rather confused Lupin followed the other two from the Hog’s Head, leaving the old barkeep staring intently at them with a thoughtful

expression. The former professor received warm greetings from several of his old students in passing, which seemed to improve his mood tremendously. Hitomi's robe shop seemed to be doing great business. Harry recognized a few young people from the village tending to the customers, many of whom were Hogwarts students. The employees bowed respectfully as their lord passed. He responded with a nod. The three made their way upstairs and sat down on the lounge floor. Hitomi remained formal, not knowing where Lupin stood on things and not wanting to give her actual relationship with Harry away to a relative stranger.

"I'm going to go make tea and fix us something to eat."

Hitomi went into the kitchen with that declaration, leaving Harry alone with Remus. The old werewolf eyed him suspiciously.

"You're up to something, Harry. Tell me what's going on here."

"Suppose I told you that there was another option, other than the Order or the Ministry."

"I'd say you were pulling my leg."

Harry shrugged with a smile.

"Let me tell first you a story about my mother's heritage, Moony..."

Harry proceeded to recite his tale and rail against the old man and the Ministry for what seemed to be the ten thousandth time. It probably wasn't all that necessary in this case, but he knew that the lycanthrope would feel somewhat hurt and betrayed if he wasn't forward with the whole story from the start. He was a bit irritated to note that he had his recruitment speech almost down to a routine. It almost reminded him of Uncle Vernon hawking his drills to wealthy clientele. Part of him wished Halloween would hurry up and arrive. He was beyond bored with the whole act of sitting back idle and arranging his chess pieces. Much the opposite of Dumbledore's thinking, Harry felt that the fighting couldn't come soon enough. His inner demon screamed for blood. Remus sat silent for several minutes once he was finished before finally speaking up.

“So Lily was the heiress of Lord Grindelwald and never knew a thing about it.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either. But it’s the truth. I’ve seen too much to doubt it now. I’ll finish what my ancestor started all those years ago. Sirius told me to change the world in his last letter. I’d like to think that he wanted me to make life better for everybody. Once my work is done there will be no more corrupt Ministry.”

Harry expected Remus to be completely sympathetic, having suffered as much as he had due to the wizarding world’s bigotry. For once, he was completely wrong. The werewolf instead wore a look filled with cold anger.

“Harry James Potter, I am shocked and appalled that you would dare sit there and tell me that Sirius would have wanted you to go through with this madness. That man fought through Hell and paid the ultimate price so that you would be safe. Lily and James both sacrificed their lives so that you might grow up and have a normal one of your own. But instead you listen to some ridiculous advice and embark on this fool’s crusade against the entire established magical world. Listen well to me, boy. I am not happy with the way things stand out there. I hate the Ministry of Magic every bit as much as you do. I want to kill Voldemort and his sick lackeys every bit as much as you do. But you seem to forget that for every person that feels the way we do, there are also hundreds that are perfectly content.”

Harry regarded his elder with a vicious sneer.

“Content with being herded along like sheep and being lied to and manipulated by a rotten government. That contentment is nothing more than pitiful complacency. Things have to be changed, Moony. Our world is dying a little more with each passing day, and soon there will be nothing left. You’ve seen firsthand how rotten the status quo is. I would have expected you of all people to see sense.”

Lupin’s expression didn’t falter a bit.

"I never told you that Voldemort once tried to recruit me over to his side during his first rising. He sent Bellatrix Lestrange to sway me over, years before Azkaban reduced her to insanity. It might shock and surprise you to hear that her words then were very much the same as yours are now."

Harry closed his eyes, almost choking with blind rage.

"I suppose this is where we part ways. Make whatever ludicrous comparisons you will. I know that the spirit of the coming generation and destiny itself are on my side. I will not stop until my goal is achieved. You just sit back and lament your bad luck while I avenge my parents and Sirius. I'll build a world that they can look down upon with pride."

Harry knew that he was being cruel, but didn't particularly care at the moment. Lupin remained seated, defiant of Harry's obvious dismissal.

"You won't be rid of me that easily, I'm quite sorry to say. My best friend and your godfather asked me to guide and protect you in his will and I will not despise his last wishes. I'm disappointed with you right now, Harry. You speak of destabilizing an entire society and slaying countless people in the name of an ideal, and risking your life for something stupid. Just as Sirius pleaded that you not. Regardless, you can bet your very last Knut that I will be right there beside you when times are tough. I owe that much to my departed Marauder comrades, and to myself. As for the rest, I need some time to think."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded curtly.

"I can grant you that much. For Padfoot's sake, I'll trust you not to reveal what I've told you to anybody else. I don't want you as my enemy, Moony. Please keep that in mind."

"I will never be your enemy, cub. I would far sooner commit suicide than ever raise my wand against you or betray your trust, and I'd swear a Wizard's Oath to either."

Hitomi returned with food and drink at that point. She wore a strained look on her beautiful face, as if she had been listening and wanted to

defend Harry but knew better than to interfere in his personal business. He was thankful enough just to have something to distract him from having to think about some of Lupin's angry words. Lunch was a rather tense and silent affair, after which Remus took his leave and departed with a thin smile. Harry hoped that Lupin would keep his mouth shut as promised. Otherwise he would be forced to dispose of the old werewolf, which was something that he was not entirely sure that he could do. He stayed with Hitomi until the time came that he was expected back at the castle. Her presence soothed him and quelled his discontent.

(End Chapter Twenty-One)

Author's Note: Finally done with this chapter. Sorry about the wait, but there's only so much I can do when a hurricane strikes. I'm generally happy with this chapter, aside from the conversation with Remus. Harry's sentiments on all of the recruiting are very much an echo of my own. Glory, but I am tired of writing that crap over and over again. Some may think Remus should have joined instantly, but I wanted for something not to go in Harry's favor for a I wrote, I noticed that things were always falling into place for him, and I don't want it to be that easy all the one more chapter until I'm all set to do a real battle scene again. I can hardly wait. Now that most of Harry's allies are recruited and the pieces are in place for his army, the plot will finally pick up some steam. My gratitude goes out to all of you who have stuck with this story through all the slow parts. I promise that things are just about to get much more exciting. On what is likely a less welcome note for some of you, Zharrghast will also be back next chapter, and expect him to pop up a lot more often from Halloween onward.

Those of you concerned about Hitomi's future role, don't be. She's not going anywhere, nor will she cease being with Harry. She's my baby and I couldn't possibly bring myself to write her out. To answer a few questions, first, Dudley was not an heir of Grindelwald through Petunia. Being the heir to a wizarding line implies actually being one, which Diddydums was not. It wouldn't matter anyway, as the fat tosser is dead. Second, I just made up the name "Shinn Kohaku." I stopped watching InuYasha after like twenty episodes. Now, somebody made an interesting point about Voldemort and his having

wings. Yes, he does in theory have chaotic power like Harry, but he doesn't yet know of its existence and naturally has no clue how to harness it. Harry learned through Alphonse's books, to which Tom has no access. While he doesn't have the ring, he doesn't need its catalyzing effect like Harry did. Tom is so much more powerful than Harry magically that his own chaotic reservoir would be enough to initiate the transformation, and his serpent body has more affinity to the chaos than Harry's previously human body. Harry has his own tricks to stabilize things a bit, but he is no match for either Tom or Albus in a straight wizard's duel.

Next chapter will be the Ministry Ball, and maybe Harry having to break the news of his engagement to Hitomi and make things right with her. Prepare for some fireworks in any case. Hope you all enjoy and please take a moment to review.

"I never knew you had a taste for other girls."

"I don't really. I honestly think it's just Su. She's so pretty and energetic."

Cho was right, Su Li was undeniably beautiful. Harry had thought her rather plain on first sight, but there was a certain inner radiance to her that shined forth that evening.

"And tight. Merlin, that was painful. But I agree. We may just have to keep her."

"Yeah, we need to make this a lasting arrangement. We'll talk to her in the morning."

Cho leaned over Su's body and kissed her fiancée one last time before falling asleep. Harry alone remained awake. He could feel Su's lips curl into a contented smile against his sweat-glistened chest. He rhythmically stroked the younger girl's hair until he too eventually succumbed to slumber.

Chapter Twenty-Two: A Kunoichi's Love - Insanity Prelude

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Only a few days remained until Halloween as Harry walked down the darkened streets of Hogsmeade with Kenzo, escorting the old village leader back home after the latest training session deep underneath Gringotts. He walked slowly, allowing the elderly Japanese man to use him as a crutch. Harry carried a wrapped parcel intended for Hitomi under his other arm, contents courtesy of the artisans that Grilthauk had contracted to fashion equipment for his vassals. Most of them had selected light and functional gear, namely breastplates and leggings crafted of magically reinforced silver, as well as dragonhide battle robes. As for weapons, the male contingent of his unit opted for silver short swords similar to the Roman gladius, heavy enough to inflict significant damage while remaining easy to wield. They were about two feet or so in length. The females had instead taken up lighter silver daggers that were a little less than a foot long.

The only exceptions to those uniform standards were Ron and Su. The redhead asked to have a large flanged mace crafted of a heavier alloy along with some sturdier battle armor. He was coming to terms with the fact that he was mostly ineffective in a purely magical duel, and that his greatest martial asset laid in his physical strength. His budding fighting strategy was to use his wand mostly for defense, deflecting hostile spells for long enough to get into close quarters and maul the aggressor. Many wizards and witches, and especially purebloods, were in markedly poor physical condition and would thus be largely unable to evade him. He did show some talent for the Dark Arts due to the fact that he was generally dominated by his emotions and consumed with a great deal of irreconcilable hatred for the likes of Death Eaters. He took to the Unforgivables rather more easily than his counterparts. As much as he hated Voldemort's lackeys, Ron wasn't all that different in temperament, distinguished from them only in terms of ideology.

Su, on the other hand, needed to remain as flexible as possible while fighting and resisted taking the same static armaments as the others, instead choosing a light woven mesh garment similar to Hitomi's training suits, along with a pair of customized combat sais. The latter were going to take a good while to craft, as they were to be imbued with magical cores so that she would be able to wield them in each hand and still be able to work spells in combat. It wasn't unheard of for enchanted combat weapons to be used as an alternative to a wand, but the power output was typically a great deal lower. That wasn't a problem for Su, who relied on finesse and technique rather than raw magical force to begin with, but Harry felt the reduced strength to be too much of a handicap to consider using an imbued sword himself. Being at anything less than optimum power against a wizard of Voldemort's caliber was a sure way to get one's self slaughtered.

It had been a simple matter for Harry to order some items to be fashioned for Hitomi on the side, as he had filched one of her battle suits the previous time he had stayed with her and was thus able to provide her measurements. He had arranged for the tailor, a surprisingly reputable dealer basted out of Knockturn Alley, to create a similar garment woven with magically reinforced silver thread. It

would protect her well, though she would likely have to wear it under her usual suit. The glittering metal would be extremely easy to spot otherwise, and would summarily destroy any attempt at stealth. Harry had also come across a short blade similar to her favored ninjato while rummaging around in the Black vault one evening as his vassals were occupied with independent study. The blade was terminally moist and razor sharp, and seemed to be coated with some form of lethal corrosive agent. He had no doubts that she would appreciate his rather macabre gifts. Or at least he hoped, as plying the kunoichi into a contented mood would bolster his odds of getting through the night intact.

As per the usual with the young dakaathi hybrid, Harry's actions bore an ulterior motive. He intended to tell Hitomi of his engagement to Cho tonight, lest she come to find out about it in the Daily Prophet the morning after the Ministry Ball. She had been forgiving when he had previously kept his relationship with the Chinese girl hidden, but would not likely be so again. She wouldn't leave him regardless, but this had to be handled carefully as not to provoke unnecessary friction. Kenzo apparently noticed him spacing out.

"You seem rather distracted this evening, young lord."

"This village is quiet now. And yet, it's going to become a battlefield within the week."

"I have heard nothing to the effect."

"You wouldn't have, but I know. Voldemort will be arriving here on Halloween night. He aims to induct me into his ranks, at least according to the letter that he sent me nearly two months ago. I will face him in the town square and finish him off once and for all. You're the only person that knows of this."

"Surely you must know that he will be prepared for a battle. This Voldemort is no fool. We have observed his movements and activities for several months now. He is far too cautious to blunder into his own demise. This scheme of yours is doomed to backfire."

“Voldemort is hopelessly arrogant, Kenzo. I have dealt with him personally and seen it several times. He will come, content in his delusion that I hate Albus Dumbledore and the Ministry of Magic enough to join him, and that I could never hope to defeat him otherwise. He will die and his carcass will rot here for all the wizarding world to see.”

They presently reached their destination, the modest Japanese robe shop that served as home to Hitomi and Kenzo. They sat down at the kitchen table after climbing the stairs. Hitomi's grandfather was not yet through remonstrating with Harry.

“Of course he will come, young lord. But you cannot hope to defeat him and his followers without backup. You are far too important to us all. Do not cast away your life needlessly. Such a thing would destroy our cause and shatter my granddaughter's heart.”

Harry shook his head. He had to go it alone, or else Voldemort's suspicion would be roused right from that start. Besides, he simply needed to hold out for a few minutes, and then he would be free to engage the Dark Lord one-on-one. Dumbledore and his people would doubtless come running down to the village the very moment the Hogwarts wards detected spellfire. Harry would use the old man's protective nature to his advantage and let the Order sacrifice their people instead of publicly revealing his own force.

“Were I to bring an escort or lay an ambush, he would certainly sense it and withdraw. His forces are weak now, Kenzo. His most powerful followers are still imprisoned in Azkaban and he has yet to replenish what he lost in that failed attack on the Hogwarts Express. This is the moment to obliterate him once and for all. Anyway, our forces will be occupied elsewhere that night. I've ordered Alberto to divide them into five separate raiding parties. They are to plunder Voldemort's key strongholds and supply bases while I have him occupied here. So you see, I'm counting on him not coming alone. He will leave his positions vulnerable and open to our sneak attack. If I slay him as planned, then this war is over and the first phase of our overall plan is complete. Should I for some reason be unable to finish him off, then we will at least have crippled his war effort.”

“It is a dangerous gambit, but one that you seem to have planned carefully.”

“I’ve had several months to put this attack together. The Ministry Ball that I’m expected to attend early that evening puts a hamper on my immediate preparations, but hopefully everything will go off smoothly. And don’t worry about me. I seem to have some uncanny knack for surviving when I really shouldn’t. I’m not going to die just yet.”

Kenzo chuckled and reached for a warm bottle of sake.

“I certainly hope not. And Hitomi, do stop hiding behind that corner. You are a most gifted eavesdropper, but still not yet good enough to spy upon this old man.”

Harry glanced over to the entrance of the small nook that represented the kitchen as Hitomi slinked in from around a corner and sat down on his knee, burying her head into the crook of his neck. He was too used to it to be in the least embarrassed.

“Of course you noticed me, grandpa. I wanted to see if Harry would.”

Harry grinned broadly.

“I’m afraid not. I seem to recall being preoccupied with looking down the instructor’s top when she went over it in class. I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Then you’ll just have to suffer through a private remedial lesson tonight. It’s lucky for you that I’m such a dedicated teacher, or else you’d be lost. I’m making some of your favorite banana tempura now. I’ll have mine on our futon later.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at the young woman’s suggestive talk in front of Kenzo as she brought out two bowls of sake pickles and a pot of tea. The old village leader excused himself for bed almost immediately after the brief snack, flashing his annoying knowing smile and chastising the remaining pair about making too much noise at night and interrupting an elderly man’s much needed rest. Once he was gone, Harry found himself being force fed tempura by the

beautiful female reclining in his lap. It was decidedly enjoyable, a sort of homey intimacy that would probably never experience with Cho. He had the feeling that his married life with the Chang heiress was fated to end up being a very public and somewhat formal affair, as opposed to the private and relaxed life that he might have with Hitomi. Both had their distinct appeal and he couldn't bring himself to choose just one. He would simply have to make both women his. He noticed the wrapped parcel sitting on the floor beside him and picked it up.

"I brought something for you, here."

"You really shouldn't have. But I'm glad that you did, of course."

She took a moment to open her gift and look at the contents, running her hands over the silver threaded fighting suit and carefully inspecting the ninjato. After a moment of silence she squealed and slammed her mouth onto his, nipping on his upper lip and then forcefully thrusting her tongue into his mouth. The kiss lasted for the better part of two minutes before he pulled away.

"I take it you approve, then."

He was gifted with another peck on the mouth in response.

"Most men would only bring flowers or chocolate. You have much better taste."

"An instrument of war illuminates the path to a lady's heart, or something to the effect."

Hitomi laughed against his chest.

"That's possibly the worst line I've ever heard, but rather true in my case. Most couples exchange trinkets and jewelry as presents, but we give each other weapons. As it happens, I have an offering of my own ready for you tonight. Go lie down in our bedroom while I get changed."

Cho often lovingly baited him about his horrid romantic lines, so Hitomi's statement came as no surprise. Harry had intended to spill

about his betrothal then and there, but instead decided to play along with her wishes. Hitomi was always at her most pliable just after having being fucked out of her senses and would be least likely to react angrily when tired. He proceeded down the hall and relaxed on the familiar futon while undressing Kenzo's former guest bed was now beginning to carry the kunoichi's distinct scent. She sauntered in not long behind him, now dressed in her new silver garb. The metallic thread was extremely tight against her voluptuous form. Hitomi looked as if she had merely stripped to the buff and covered her body with glittering metallic paint. Her soft pale skin was very faintly visible underneath the taut garment. He sat transfixed by her alluring beauty as she slithered onto the futon and fused her lips with his ear.

"I'm glad you like the view. You went to all this trouble to have a new training suit made for me, so the least I can do is allow you a private exhibition."

Harry kissed her roughly and ran his hands all over her silver-clad body. He fondled her backside as he clasped her against himself and traced her soft chest with the palm of his free hand.

"This is quite the present, but the wrapping is so enchanting that I can hardly bring myself to remove it."

Hitomi wrenched his head down to her chest.. The metal was bitter to the taste but also strangely additcive. He immensely desired the kunoichi at that moment and moved to claim her. She stopped him with a pout and regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

"You'll ruin my new suit, not to mention chafing yourself."

Harry smirked, a fanatical gleam shining in his emerald eyes.

"I had the tailor fashion an opening down there just for such an occurrence."

"By all means then, continue."

Harry did just that, indulging in the game that had long since overtaken Quidditch as his favorite. That thought caused him to

briefly recall Gryffindor's opening match against Ravenclaw. It had taken place roughly a week before. Cho was extremely put out upon noticing that Harry had moved positions, effectively robbing her of her long awaited rematch. She had been flying a brand new Firebolt, a present from her father as a reward for her procuring a suitable husband. The man seemed to be too confident that Harry would accept his offer. Gryffindor's Chaser line, consisting of himself and Katie along with a third year girl whose name he couldn't recall, played remarkably well. Harry scored six goals himself but Cho flew circles around Ginny and eventually caught the snitch for a 170-130 Ravenclaw win, gaining a measure of revenge for the previous year's embarrassment in the finals. Harry's own broomstick was getting some mileage of its own at the present. It wasn't the best night that he and Hitomi had shared together, but he was too preoccupied with the coming conversation to really get into the spirit. She had shrugged the silver bodysuit off halfway through and was now resting against his chest.

"Hitomi, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"In the morning, loverboy. I'm too exhausted right now. Besides, I already overheard the story. I won't try to stop you from fighting on Halloween, but just please be careful. I don't want to lose you, Harry. A life without you is unthinkable to me now."

"That's quite a statement for having known me less than half a year. Like I told your grandfather earlier, there's no need to worry. I have no intentions of dying yet. But that's not what I needed to tell you."

Hitomi picked up on his lowered tone of voice and sat upright, leaning against the wall.

"I can already tell from your tone of voice that it involves that Chang girl. I'm listening."

Harry sighed, knowing it would be best to come right out with it and then explain.

"I won't circumvent the issue, then. She and I are betrothed due to an arrangement put forth by her father. The official announcement will be

made in a few days. I hope that it doesn't change anything between us, but you deserve better than to have to find out through the Daily Prophet or some other rag."

Hitomi was silent for a long time, but then smiled softly.

"I suppose it was going to have to be somebody. At least it's a girl that you genuinely care about and not just some political match. I really couldn't have married you anyway. Had you asked me first, I would have been forced to decline."

Harry was confused and just a little hurt.

"I don't understand."

She gently cupped his cheeks and stared into his eyes.

"You know what I am, Harry. The world that I come from. My entire existence is meant to always remain shrouded in secrecy. Famous Harry Potter's beautiful bride will become an international wizarding celebrity. For me to be thrust into that spotlight would risk exposing our clan to the entire world and I would be memory wiped and banished as a result. Or even worse, outright executed for treason. Grandpa's aware of this, and he's been worried almost to his death for months now about what he was going to say should you actually ask for my hand in marriage. He wants us to be happy together, but his foremost duty is always to our people. So you see, your getting married to Chang is the best scenario for everybody in the end."

"And what we shared is over, then. You just said that you couldn't live without me, and now you're saying that this was all a farce. I don't like being toyed with, kunoichi."

Hitomi's shaky smile faltered somewhat and she cast her eyes away. Almost too quickly for Harry's eyes to even register, she whirled around and slapped him in the face. He was too stunned to respond, having never really seen her angry before. His voice was low and dangerous.

“Don’t you ever accuse me of playing games with you. I have been nothing but true and honest with you from the very beginning. You’ve shared bedding with several other women while I’ve remained unwaveringly faithful, and you’re now engaged to marry another girl. And you still have the audacity to say that I’m the one playing you for a fool. I love you with every fiber of my being and I’ve never once uttered a single word of complaint about your sleeping around, but that is crossing the line. And no, we are not finished. I’ll be with you for as long as you’ll have me.”

Harry gave as close to an apology as he was willing in response. Just about anybody else would already be writhing on the ground for daring to strike him, but he could never bring himself to raise a hand against her. Besides, she had every right to be pissed. He had put her through quite a bit without even stopping to think about it.

“I shouldn’t have said that, but my feelings on the subject are unchanged. I care too much about you for me to just keep you as some lowly mistress. Cho will soon be married to Harry Potter and will become the famous celebrity wife. The entire magical world will know of our union. But the Boy-Who-Lived is only a part of me. I no longer completely reject it as I did just after my transformation. Harry Potter is the shining icon of the light and the savior of the wizarding world, and is important in his own right. But there is that other side of me as well, the one that strives to conquer and carry on my ancestor’s legacy. That part of me needs you, Hitomi. Cho will see to the future succession of my father’s ancestral line, and I want you to do the same for my mother’s. I came here tonight with the intention of asking you to marry into the line of Grindelwald. I won’t deny that I am very much in love with Cho, but I also feel the same way about you.”

Hitomi closed her eyes and hugged her significant other. Harry needed to take a second wife according to tradition. A lord of more than one family was expected to sire successors legitimately by different women for each, in order to keep the bloodlines as strong and diverse as possible. There were other suitable claimants around for the Black family, and so he could simply allow it to revert later, but both of his parents’ lines were extinguished aside from him. Aunt Petunia might have been a claimant as a Squib at one point in time, but her vehement hatred of all things magical would have

extinguished whatever reservoir she might have possessed. Now she was for all intents and purposes a Muggle, and her only son was dead regardless.

“That’s very sweet, Harry. But I just can’t have that sort of...”

“There’s no need for any publicity. Once I’ve been married to Cho and the media zealots have had their fill of the Potter wedding, you and I can have a quiet little ceremony somewhere. No reporters or politicians, no spectacle to speak of. Just the two of us and maybe a few witnesses if you like. I don’t know about your people’s traditions, but perhaps your grandfather can marry us as the leader of your sect. I can pull enough strings to ensure that nobody ever has to find out about it, if it worries you that much.”

She didn’t look convinced, but gave him a kiss.

“I’m not sure that’s going to work, but we’ll ask my grandpa about it anyway. I’ve been worried about what might happen when this whole struggle is over. I would be expected to travel to Japan with the rest of our sect and rejoin the larger clan unless there was something binding to keep me here. I would have had to become a runaway and be considered a traitor permanently marked for death in order to stay with you. I’ve been prepared to do that, you know. I would fight for us until my dying breath, but being allowed to marry you without any nasty repercussions would be a dream come true. I don’t ever want to have to leave you, Harry. Please believe me when I say that.”

Harry felt gratified by her words, as he would never let her go either.

“Then I’ll make the proposition to Kenzo after breakfast in the morning.”

“No, let me broach the subject after you return to the castle. Grandpa will appreciate being able to consider the matter before you approach him with it. You are our lord until the end of this campaign, and he wouldn’t think to defer his decision before you.”

Harry nodded his agreement.

“Fine, we can do that. I don’t want to force his hand either.”

“Thank you. I’m really sorry for slapping you, by the way. But you know, it really was rather underhanded of you to bring all of this up right after sex.”

Harry smirked and shrugged his shoulders.

“If this was fated to be our last night together, I wanted to get my money’s worth.”

She had fallen into a giddy slumber before hearing his response. He quickly followed, dreaming simply of being hand fed tempura and rice cakes every morning for the rest of his life. Hitomi knew everything and had accepted it. Now all that was left was to repeat the entire process with Cho. The second run would prove more treacherous than the first.

Halloween had finally arrived. At a little past six in the evening at the Ministry Ball, Harry sat at a small table eating with Cho and her parents. He was dressed in his most expensive silken dress robes. Cho wore the a resplendent red lacquered Chinese robe that was in many ways the same make as the one that she had been sporting when he had come across her in the middle of Liangshan Alley all those months ago. Her parents were likewise extravagantly dressed, determined to make a good impression upon the Ministry bigwigs in attendance. The large ballroom was nearly filled to capacity, with nearly a hundred Hogwarts students and their parents present along with almost any government official worthy of note. Harry took a moment to look around for his friends.

One table a good distance away was filled almost entirely with Weasleys. The four youngest had all taken part in the battle that brought this stuffy celebration about, and both Molly and Arthur were present as well. Percy was also sitting there, though he seemed a bit less than pleased with the arrangement, along with his longtime girlfriend. Harry recalled her as being in Ravenclaw and as one of the students who had been attacked by the basilisk during his second year at school, though her name escaped him at present. Hermione was sitting with them as well. Mrs. Weasley appeared to be rather put

out when Harry didn't sit with the family, but accepted it after a brief explanation.

His other vassals and the remaining student defenders and their families were spread about the hall. The meal was almost over, and it would soon be time for the dancing that would conclude the evening. The Order of Merlin awarding ceremony had already taken place. Harry now bore First Class honors, surpassing everybody in attendance aside from Dumbledore, who sat at the front of the room with the remaining dignitaries from the prestigious magical society. Ron and Hermione both received Second Class for all of their various contributions to Harry's victories over Voldemort. All of the other students were awarded Third Class. The ceremony was preceded by a long speech from Dumbledore and followed by an even longer one from Fudge, who also rushed to stand next to Harry at the front of the group of awardees when the Daily Prophet cameramen showed their faces. Trust the bumbling politico to never pass up a photo opportunity.

"Have you come to a decision regarding our proposal then, Harry?"

Harry snapped his gaze over to Cho's father, ready to answer the big question. She grasped his hand from under the table in a supportive gesture, though he hardly needed it. He had expected the question to come at any moment, as soon as everybody at the table had finished their meal.

"We have come to a decision, Mister Chang. Your offer is accepted. You may feel free to schedule the wedding for whenever you see fit."

Song Chang clapped his hands repeatedly, the handsome older wizard's victorious grin threatening to spit his face asunder. Cho's mother likewise seemed pleased, but her enchanting visage betrayed a hint of unease about the arrangement. Cho herself kept an impassive countenance as her father continued.

"Excellent, then we will conduct the ceremony on the Chinese New Year. It will serve as the perfect centerpiece for our annual festival. I must admit that I had worried for some now time that my daughter would never condescend to find herself to a suitable partner, but

she's climbed to the very peak of the mountain and claimed the dragon as her own."

Being called a dragon brought up some very unwelcome parallels to Malfoy, though Harry was sure that the senior Chang had intended nothing of the sort. The young wizard answered accordingly as the man continued to heap praise on the betrothed couple. Despite all of her previous complaints about her father, Cho was nearly ecstatic at finally having appeased the man. Albus Dumbledore's voice rang throughout the hall, abruptly ending the moment.

"If you will all please rise from your seats, we will clear the floor and continue with the evening's dance festivities."

Everybody stood as instructed. Dumbledore waved his wand lazily and the chairs and tables vanished along with all of their contents, leaving room full of people standing on an empty dance floor. A long table topped with an enormous punch bowl and other refreshments appeared at a far edge of the room. The ceiling phased out and took on the form of the starry evening sky, looking identical to that of the Great Hall at Hogwarts during the annual beginning of term banquet. Dance music rang throughout the hall from some unknown origin. Harry allowed Cho to drag him off to a less crowded spot.

"Dance with me, Harry."

"I can't dance. Ask Parvati if you think I'm joking. Then again, I seem to recall spending that whole entire Yule Ball being preoccupied with scowling at some Hufflepuff for taking the girl I fancied."

"Well, you don't have that excuse now. Just follow my lead."

Harry tried his best to do just that. He was rather sleek and graceful to begin with as a result of his dueling training with Bill and adapted without much difficulty, or at least well enough that he didn't step on Cho's toes at any point. He was far from the most elegant dancer on the floor, but nobody could deny that he and his partner made the most attractive couple. Harry noticed some of the looks they were receiving and laughed softly.

“Half the women here are giving you the death glare, and some of them are almost old enough to be my grandmother.”

“Then I’ll just have to give the cows something to really be jealous about.”

At the very instant Cho finished her sentence her mouth was covering his. Never one to shy away from causing a scene, Harry kissed her back with equal fervor. He could feel the eyes of most of the other couples on the both of them. She pulled back once she was apparently satisfied that she had marked her territory. Somebody cleared his or her throat behind them. It was Song Chang, grinning like the proverbial Cheshire Cat.

“The two of you do indeed make quite the pair, but I’m afraid I must ask to cut in.”

Harry nodded and backed out as Cho directed a rather scathing glare of her own at her father. He ventured over to the refreshment table and glimpsed the Weasley twins huddled over the punch bowl with identical grins on their faces. One of them held a bottle that was obviously filled with some sort of liquor. The other noticed Harry and roped him in with an arm around the shoulders, whispering conspiratorially.

“Insty-Drunkinsky Vodka, mate. Smuggled in from Old Mother Russia. We owe Mundungus Fletcher huge for this one. Whoever comes to this punch bowl’s gonna be knackered out of their undercrackers after one swallow.”

“Let’s hope that Dumbledore or Fudge get thirsty at some point, then.”

Harry left the twins to their scheming with that remark, coming across Cho’s mother traipsing through the crowd while her husband was busy embarrassing their daughter.

“Care to favor me with a dance, Mrs. Chang?”

Da Qin Chang smiled broadly at her future son-in-law.

“Waltzing about the ballroom floor with my daughter’s fiancée, the very idea. I think that I might enjoy that very much, Mister Potter.”

Harry smiled slightly and took the older woman’s hand. She couldn’t have been much older than her mid-thirties. She had to have given birth to Cho at a rather young age. She was in many ways a dead ringer for her daughter, except more developed. Cho’s mother was dressed in a perfectly tailored white Chinese silk robe and her hair was arranged and pinned with a pair of scented wooden sticks. Absolutely breathtaking, and Harry soon found himself entertaining thoughts that he shouldn’t about his future mother-in-law.

“And speaking of Cho, you would be impossible to distinguish from her if only your hair were let down. She’s a beautiful young woman, and it’s easy to tell where it comes from. Your husband is a very lucky man, Mrs. Chang.”

The woman blushed ever so slightly, broadening Harry’s smile to the same degree.

“You certainly are a charmer. I can tell that Cho will have to keep you on a tight leash. She has her father’s nose, but the rest does indeed come from me.”

Harry led Mrs. Chang onto the dance floor. As she had offhandedly predicted, the next number was a waltz. She was a magnificent dancer, far more experienced and talented than her daughter. Harry had difficulty keeping up with her. In the middle of the routine, her smiling face turned serious.

“Mister Potter, I need you to reassure me of something.”

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

“And what might that be, Mrs. Chang?”

“I need you to promise me that you are marrying my Cho because you genuinely care for her and not for the sake of whatever my husband has promised you in addition. It is not my place to interfere

with Song's dealings, but I need to know that my only daughter will be able to live a happy life without being ensnared in a loveless marriage."

"I nearly outright rejected your husband's offer out of respect for Cho. I felt that she deserved better than to have her father choose a husband for her. We discussed it together and mutually decided to accept. This marriage is our choice, not just mine. Yes, I love your daughter very much and I will do everything in my considerable power to ensure that she is nothing but happy in our relationship."

The dance ended and Mrs. Chang bowed to Harry.

"Then she is very lucky to have you. I look forward to including you into our family."

For some reason, that statement carried some importance for Harry. The dancing continued for the next few hours, during which time he did a few more rounds with Cho and also found himself commandeered by Blaise Zabini as he went for a glass of water. She wore a revealing tight black dress and came onto him with her usual act. Ginny thankfully showed up and snagged him away before the Slytherin was able to fully embarrass him, and he shared a quick dance with her in return. Several people around the room found themselves quite inebriated after partaking of the punch, much to the delight of the twins. Delight that turned into terror when Mrs. Weasley noticed them smirking and dragged them from the party with an ear in each hand. The last dance of the evening was due to start before long. Harry and Cho were wandering about the mingling crowd for a few moments when somebody bumped into the former from behind.

"Harry, my boy! Finally managed to catch you, I see!"

Harry turned around to see a smiling Cornelius Fudge, accompanied by a slightly chubby woman who was apparently his wife. He looked decidedly out of place without his bowler hat, his balding top exposed for the world to see. Harry forced himself to smile back and took a slight bow.

“Good evening, Minister. It is rather odd that we’ve managed to pass the whole evening without crossing paths once until now. Excellent party, by the way. The punch is particularly exquisite.”

Harry rather wanted the dance to begin, so that he could avoid more small talk with the blustering gnome of a Minister. He did hope that Fudge would try the twins’ spiked drink on his recommendation and proceed to make a fool of himself.

“I’ll be sure to have somebody pass your compliments on to the house-elves. I don’t believe that I’ve been introduced to your young lady friend. I seem to recall seeing the two of you together that afternoon on the Hogwarts grounds as well. Oh, and this lovely woman is my wife, Annette.”

Harry buried a grimace and kissed Mrs. Fudge’s hand respectfully. Cho appeared to be mere seconds away from retching.

“Well met, Mrs. Fudge. And my lady friend is actually now my fiancée. We’ve finalized the arrangements with her family just this evening. Cho Chang, of Liangshan Alley.”

Fudge returned Harry’s gesture with Cho. If Harry didn’t know better, he would have sworn that she turned slightly green at the contact. The Minister then clapped Harry’s back jovially.

“Well, that’s splendid news if I’ve ever heard any! Harry Potter, engaged to marry!”

A slightly slurred male voice sounded from behind them.

“Yes, just bloody wonderful.”

Harry, Cho, Fudge and his wife all turned to see a reeling Amos Diggory standing behind them. He had an empty punch cup in his hand and fire in his eyes. Harry had long disliked the man and strode forward. The bloodlust was pounding within him. His hands ached to strangle the life out of this pathetic loser of a man. He would be more than happy to begin tonight’s inevitable slaughter a few hours early.

“Do you have some sort of problem, Diggory?”

The shorter man drew himself up comically, stumbling due to the effort.

“None at all, boy. Except that I now see my dear departed Ced’s beloved girlfriend all cozied up with and ready to marry the little punk that watched him die. I can’t help but wonder what he would say if he could see her now. It shames me to know that my only son ended his life head over heels in love with a filthy slant-eyed trollop like her.”

Harry’s own eyes blazed as he reached for his wand. Fudge was bristling with anger and redder than a beet. His wife tried to intercede before the Minister blew his stack. Cho stopped Harry from attacking Cedric’s embittered father.

“Don’t, Harry...let me.”

Cho calmly usurped her boyfriend’s place in front of Amos Diggory. The bearded man sneered down at her with something akin to hatred in his eyes. He then sank to his knees in pain, courtesy of the Chinese girl’s foot lashing out and connecting hard with his groin. She followed up with a vicious right hook to the drunken man’s face. Harry almost winced as he heard Diggory’s nose crumple like biscuit under the force of the blow. He fell to the ground in a heap, one hand on his groin, the other on his gushing face. Cho stepped on his head and spoke coldly.

“You vile, bitter little man. If you want to know about Cedric’s feelings, then I’ll tell you. Wherever he is now, he’s much happier for having to be nowhere near you. He despised you, Amos. Of course, he was always too meek and loyal to say anything, the very epitome of a Hufflepuff. But make no mistake; he was both resentful and ashamed of the fact that you tried to live vicariously through him. You pushed him to the very brink of a nervous breakdown simply because of the fact that you yourself are a miserable failure in life and needed some small claim to fame. Think on that for a while, Diggory. Your beloved son hated you and would have given almost anything to have never had to see you again. Voldemort did him a favor if anything.”

Cho then turned on her heel and walked away. Harry went to follow, but turned first to the irate Minister. He smirked broadly at his future wife's actions. Just maybe she would be able to keep up with him. Their married life was sure to be quite interesting.

"I'm afraid I'll need to be leaving now. It's been a most eventful evening."

Harry then followed Cho, leaving a shocked crowd behind. As he left Fudge, he could have sworn that he saw a certain familiar beetle perched on the shoulder of the Minister's tacky green dress robes. Song Chang might not have been able to announce the betrothal to the world that night, but it would surely be all over the headlines the next morning regardless. Or maybe not, depending on the results of Harry's forthcoming encounter with Voldemort. As Harry left the ballroom after Cho, he could clearly hear Fudge screaming at Diggory. She was waiting for him in an outdoor garden.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I just lost my temper."

Harry smiled wryly at her, in a gesture that he hoped was reassuring.

"Don't worry about it. You were brilliant. Now let's go back to the castle. I'm tired."

Cho nodded and took his hand. Harry withdrew his Portkey necklace from his robes and activated it, bringing them straight into her dormitory at Hogwarts. They went straight to bed together, though he had no intention of falling asleep. He held Cho until he could feel that she was no longer awake. He then stood up out of bed and gently kissed her forehead, speaking in a soft voice barely above a whisper.

"Sleep well, Cho. Voldemort will be dead and gone by the time you awaken."

Harry quickly left her dormitory to prepare for battle. He never noticed her soft obsidian eyes shoot open in horror as he departed. With fifteen minutes remaining until the stroke of midnight, Harry stalked quietly down the path leading into Hogsmeade. He had Portkeyed from his empty dormitory in Gryffindor Tower where he

had dressed for combat to a point well removed from the castle in an effort to ensure that no patrolling faculty member would catch him leaving. Only the noise of his two tiger bodyguards, Grindelwald and Khariana, broke the silence as he neared ever closer to what might very well be his death. His hands were shaking with anticipation and a slight bit of fear. He alone would take on the terrible Dark Lord Voldemort and almost surely a large party of his elite followers as well. A silky, dangerous voice resonated in his mind just as the village became visible on the horizon.

“Off to battle once more, my fallen angel.”

Zharrghast's presence was normally unwelcome, even as infrequently as he made it know. But now, as he marched alone into Hell, Harry found the indomitable fallen god's voice to be quite strangely reassuring.

“It's been nearly two months, Zharrghast. One might forget that you even existed.”

“Hehehehe...I have been watching you grow. You are evolving even more quickly than I could have hoped for. You now crave the slaughter. Your inner demon cries for blood, just as your hands tremble uncontrollably out of lust for it.”

“My hands shake for many reasons. Fear not the least among them.”

“Indeed, you march into a battle even more difficult than your last. You are wise to be afraid of death. But fear not. You shall be victorious. I shall see to it.”

“Naturally. But I can't help but wonder about the price of that conquest.”

“You would do well not be impertinent, mortal. The time for us to become one is drawing ever nearer.”

“But the time to fight is now.”

And indeed, Harry had arrived in Hogsmeade. He walked into the main square, standing under a charmed lamppost. The streets were oddly deserted. The chime of a grandfather clock rung out from a nearby house. Midnight. Twelve strokes, and the cracking noise of Apparition filled his ears. Almost as if predetermined by fate, they arrived directly opposite him. The tall, skeletal figure of Lord Voldemort stood in the center of a ring of six masked Death Eaters, all wearing the pure white masks that signified the inner circle. Harry stood straight and proud, unwilling to show even the slightest inkling of dread before his destined enemy. Voldemort's serpentine face contorted into an eerie grin as slitted crimson eyes bore into blazing forest green. His high-pitched voice spoke out with just a small hint of glee.

"Well met, Harry Potter. Prince of Darkness."

(End Chapter Twenty-Two)

Author's Note: Yeah, I'm late in updating again. I had a hard time writing this one for some reason. All of the stuff with Hitomi and Kenzo just wouldn't come out properly. Also, I had a final to prepare for. Took that this morning, hopefully aced it. In the end, I liked this chapter. I think Hitomi came off rather well. I know a lot of you expected her to be angry, and I originally intended to make her that way. But I got the idea for her to have other concerns higher than marriage to deal with. It says a lot for her character that she would be willing to risk her life in order to stay with Harry. I didn't feel the need to post an NC-17 warning here, as there was nothing in the intimate scene that could even be remotely described as explicit. I know I didn't follow up the thing at the end of last chapter with Su, but I couldn't think of anywhere to fit it here. It'll be dealt with in an upcoming chapter.

The Ministry Ball was a lot of fun to write once I got into it. I'll admit it, I hate Amos Diggory. I had my own fun by making Cho knock the shit out of him, and I really think that his words were reflective of something he would say, especially with his tongue loosened by drink. I also felt that the story has been woefully short of Fred and George moments, so I put one here. And now I have this urge to have Harry

carry on something with Cho's mother. Nothing is likely to come of it, but the possibility is there.

And finally we're set for battle. I've been looking forward to writing the next chapter for a very long time now. If my vision bears fruit, then it will make the Hogwarts Express battle look like a student duel in the corridors of the school by comparison. On quick note I gleamed from a review now. Just because Harry thinks the entire world will fall into place for him once he overthrows the Ministry doesn't mean that it will. Harry is a bit delusional and arrogant when it comes down to it. Everything isn't going to work out as easily as he believes. Hope you all enjoy, and don't forget to review. The more feedback I get, the quicker the battle you've all been waiting for will come out.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Where Angels Fear to Tread – Howling for the Moon

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Harry inclined his head mockingly with a smile, taking a moment to observe his situation. Voldemort had brought a surprisingly small escort, none of whom Harry recognized. Something was off about this whole scenario. He would have figured that Bellatrix at least would be present but none of the Death Eaters even remotely matched her physique. Harry had initially planned to taunt the escort with details of

Voldemort's impure heritage, hoping to turn them against their master. However, there wasn't enough of an audience to make it worth doing now.

"Voldemort."

Five of the Death Eaters present snarled and hissed at Harry's flippant use of the Dark Lord's name. The remaining one, a large and rough-looking man with the fierce golden eyes of a savage werewolf, grinned appreciatively through pointed teeth. Harry knew that his best chance of winning this fight would be to rile Voldemort and his lackeys enough to make them fight irrationally. Tom Riddle's pride was his greatest weakness. His enemy's laconic grin faltered a bit at Harry's lack of respect.

"Tonight you have answered my call. Step forward, my heir, and receive your mark."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. He might as well get this party started before Voldemort had the time to really figure out his agenda. He drew his wand almost quicker than the eye could see as he spoke his next sentence and roared out his first attack.

"I'm afraid you're sorely mistaken, Tom. I've come here tonight only to deliver your death sentence. AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry forced all of his hate for his parents' murderer behind the lethal Unforgivable. The resulting blast was nearly a meter wide. Harry was standing too close to Voldemort for the latter to be able to dodge. It impacted him straight in the chest, driving across the square into the side of a building. Harry laughed victoriously as the Death Eaters looked on it abject shock. The expressions reversed as Voldemort quickly regained his bearings and glared at Harry through crimson pools of lava with a hatred that not even Snape could hope to match and cried out his response.

"You shall suffer for your arrogance, brat! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The green wave of death advanced towards Harry at nearly twice the speed of the one that he had just previously sent. He only barely managed to jump out of the way. The Death Eaters took advantage and fired a barrage of lethal curses of their own where Harry would invariably land. Harry rolled forward, causing four of them to fly overhead and strike a row of buildings behind him, igniting them instantly. The last was a Cutting Hex that impacted directly with Harry's breastplate, causing sparks to fly off as he was driven backward a few feet. Meanwhile, Voldemort had cast the Dark Mark into the air above Hogsmeade, signaling two additional squadrons of Death Eaters to come streaming into the village accompanied by four giants. Harry was surrounded.

He grunted with annoyance as he waved his wand at the ground where five of the lackeys were standing. The werewolf had already moved away. A violent shockwave sent them flying through the air, but not with enough force to remove them from the fight altogether. Harry heard the telltale crack of Voldemort Apparating in behind him, but wasn't quick enough to avoid the spell that drilled him in the back, sending him flying through the front window of The Three Broomsticks. The terrified patrons screamed as the Dark Lord again Apparated in front of Harry. This time he was prepared, firing a stream of powerful curses as soon as the serpentine wizard came into view.

"Neken. Karsado. Avada Kedavra. Batoak. Deletrius."

Voldemort lazily crossed his arms and splayed them outward, causing a purplish shield of pure negative energy to appear before him. All of Harry's attacks aside from the Killing Curse were absorbed harmlessly. The Dark Lord seamlessly swayed out of the way of the green jet of light and spat at Harry.

"Pathetic, Potter. I would have expected better from the Chosen One."

Harry sneered at the ridiculous name that the Daily Prophet had recently begun to attach to him. At least it was more accurate than most of what the corrupt newspaper posted.

“I’m just getting the lead out, Tom.”

Harry decided to try a different avenue of attack, springing forward at Voldemort without any warning. His body passed through the serpent’s magical shield and he drove his fist clean into the Dark Lord’s face with a vicious left hook, staggering him. He felt Tom’s nose and cheekbone shatter under the impact, spraying chilled blood onto his hand and forearm. He raised his wand to follow up, but Voldemort was faster on the draw, aiming at Harry’s wand arm.

“Morendo.”

The curse should have snapped every bone in Harry’s body. However, his bracer absorbed most of the impact, leaving him only with a fractured wrist. His masterpiece wand fell uselessly to the ground.

“Crucio.”

The pain racked Harry’s every nerve as intensely as it had the last time Voldemort had cast the Cruciatus Curse upon him, a sensation similar to his dakaathi transformation. Like ten thousand white hot knives piercing into every cell of his body. Harry writhed pathetically on the ground as the Dark Lord bore down onto him with a victorious sneer.

“Truly fitting, Potter. Fifteen years to the day removed from your pitiful father and Mudblood mother dying by Lord Voldemort’s hand you too will suffer the same fate.”

Harry fought against the pain with everything he had. Voldemort was content to continue taunting him as the Death Eaters began rising to their feet, showboating for his followers as three of them blasted curses at Khariana to keep her at bay. Grindelwald had tackled Fenrir Greyback to the ground as the two were now currently jockeying for supremacy. Harry took advantage of the slight lapse in the Dark Lord’s concentration, breaking the curse and again lunging at the evil overlord. This time he drew his kodachi with his left arm. Voldemort barely had time to register the movement before the Japanese sword slashed directly across his chest. He shrieked in pain as Harry

dropped the kodachi and quickly reset his broken right arm before grabbing his wand.

“Curage.”

The spell would only temporarily stop the pain, and would cause it to be much worse later. Harry couldn’t fight on a single arm, however, and would have to suffer it then. Voldemort did the same incantation for his wounds and took aim at Harry.

“Novus Incendio.”

Harry moved well out of the way quickly, but the Dark Lord’s fireball continued past him straight through the broken front window of Madam Rosmerta’s establishment and into the bar, immediately incinerating Blaise’s aunt along with well over a dozen other patrons. The Three Broomsticks had been a part of Hogsmeade for generations. Gone in an instant due to Voldemort’s fury. The other Death Eaters and giants had now arrived and were wreaking havoc everywhere, igniting buildings and fighting against those brave souls living in the village that had chosen to take to their wands in defense of their homes and families. Harry ignored his opponent for just a moment, transfixed by the carnage.

“Yes, Potter. Gaze upon the death and destruction that your foolish bravado has wrought. Dumbledore will certainly be proud.”

Harry grinned insanely at the Dark Lord. His words were only vaguely his own.

“Through death comes rebirth, Tom. Everything lost today will soon be recreated in my image.”

Voldemort regarded his changed demeanor cautiously, but without any real trepidation.

“Then you aspire to rule. I can offer you that, Potter. Come and serve me, and this little transgression of yours will be forgiven. As allies we would be completely invincible. You would command all of my loyal

Death Eaters in battle. The wizarding world would falter in less than a month. This is your last chance. Become my heir or perish.”

Harry decided to use the brief break in the fighting to again observe the situation. Khariana was down on the ground, haven apparently been hit with a curse and forgotten while Grindelwald and the werewolf were nowhere to be seen. Voldemort’s inner circle escort had gone off to assist the remaining Death Eaters and giants in fending off a group of newer arrivals. Harry distinctly noticed Bill and Fleur among them as was as Alberto leading his Aurors and desperadoes. The latter was supposed to be off conducting a raid. Kenzo must have gone behind Harry’s back to bring them here. A few of the ninja were interspersed in the magical melee, cutting apart the enemy wizards and witches with stealth attacks. Harry somehow knew that Hitomi was among them, though he hoped otherwise. Harry’s followers were doing well but they were outnumbered. The Death Eaters were making short work of most of the townsfolk that had tried to resist them.

“I don’t think so. This world is mine and nobody else’s. I will never share with you.”

Voldemort sighed theatrically, raising his yew wand again simultaneously with Harry’s.

“Such a waste of potential. Very well then, Potter. You will simply have to die.”

Harry’s maniacal leer widened.

“After you, Tom Riddle. Only after you.”

Well removed from the rest of the fray, the two most powerful dark wizards alive then began their duel in earnest in front of the burning wreckage of The Three Broomsticks. The rising smoke from the destroyed hamlet of Hogsmeade obscured the sky above, pierced only by the menacing green of the Dark Mark.

Meanwhile, Cho rushed through the corridors of Hogwarts dressed only in her nightgown and slippers. Harry had left her private dormitory only minutes before under the assumption that she had

been sleeping with a cryptic message telling of Voldemort's impending death. Her Ravenclaw mind had quickly worked out the meaning as she recalled the letter from the Dark Lord that she and her fiancée had read under the spruce tree by the lake with the Weasley boys a while back. The Dark Lord was coming to Hogsmeade with the intention of recruiting Harry, and the bloody fool was going to take him on all by himself. The sheer selfishness of her love's actions brought tears to her eyes. So many people believed in and idolized Harry Potter. She had just been officially engaged to be his wife, and now he was walking to his own death without so much as a single goodbye. If he got killed...she stopped that train of thought as she reached the gargoyle in front of Dumbledore's office. Harry would be surely be angry with her for soliciting aid from the old man, but there was no help for it. She screamed frantically at the stone guardian.

"Open up, you bloody piece of shite!"

The gargoyle leapt aside after a long, revealing a tired and amused Albus Dumbledore standing at the foot of the spiral staircase that led to his office. The top of the old man's nightcap fell down onto his face, nearly obscuring his twinkling eyes.

"Such reprehensible language for the Head Girl, Miss Chang. Alas, poor Amos Diggory is still recovering from your last burst of temper. I daresay your young fiancée is already beginning to curse you with his bad habits."

Cho had no patience for Dumbledore's eccentric sense of humor at the moment.

"Cut it with the jokes, you insufferable old coot."

Dumbledore's voice hardened a note.

"You are hysterical. Calm yourself and then kindly explain why you have felt the need to assault my office in such a fit."

She took one deep breath before continuing.

"It's Voldemort, sir. He's coming to Hogsmeade tonight. Harry's gone..."

Dumbledore cut her off, hurrying her into his office and sitting her down on a chair.

"Tell me everything, Miss Chang. And quickly. If you are correct, many lives are at risk."

"He sent Harry some recruitment letter about two months ago outlining a meeting in the central square of Hogsmeade at midnight on Halloween. Harry just left my dormitory talking about how Voldemort would be dead by tomorrow morning. He's gone to face the Dark Lord alone. Please, sir. You have to help him. I couldn't bear it if he got killed."

Just at that moment, the clock struck midnight. Dumbledore's face was already pale. It whitened even further. He hastily moved towards his fireplace to rally the Order of the Phoenix. He was just reaching for his Floo Powder when Kingsley Shacklebolt's face appeared in the flames.

"Albus, we've got trouble.. Lestrage is leading a whole horde of Death Eaters on Azkaban. The Dementors have rallied to Voldemort and are attacking the Aurors from the inside as well. The Ministry's forces can't last. They need reinforcements right now."

Albus nodded gravely.

"Rally what you can at headquarters, Kingsley. Voldemort himself is attacking the village here, and young Harry is down there all by himself. I must lead the staff and see to its..."

Cho watched the conversation, hearing the word "idiot" roar out through the fireplace, and not in the black Auror's slow voice. Shacklebolt's head disappeared and Professor Lupin came tumbling into the office. The werewolf barreled past and down towards Hogsmeade in a dead sprint without so much as a single word of acknowledgement to either her or Dumbledore, cursing about "that

foolish child.” Cho would have found the display amusing under any other circumstances. Kingsley didn’t return, already having been given his orders. Dumbledore turned back to Cho.

“There’s no time. I need you to contact your professors and inform them that Hogsmeade is under attack. I must go to Harry’s aid at once. I can only pray that we are not too late.”

Cho nodded weakly and the headmaster strode briskly out of his office, his wizened face the very picture of determination as he grabbed a long and ornately carved staff from a shelf behind his desk. His phoenix was currently observing a burning day and was thus unable to transport or accompany him. She grabbed Dumbledore’s jar of Floo Powder and first contacted her own Head of House. She would do as the old man asked. And then she would rally her people. Harry’s people. Whether he liked it or not.

Harry and Voldemort circled one another, burning wreckage crashing down all around them. Two archdemons vying to dominate the City of Dis. Despite the pain coursing through his system as the result of having an arm broken and being subjected to the Cruciatus, Harry had never once in his life felt so exhilarated. The Dark Lord made the first attack of the renewed battle, intoning a curse and whirling his wand like a lasso.

“Glycolycium.”

Harry sidestepped the metabolic burning curse and skirted out of the way of Voldemort’s whip of flame. This was the real thing. Tom was impossibly quick in his spellwork relative to Bellatrix. Harry had to duck under a Killing Curse that came out as he dodged the whip, finally having an opportunity to strike back.

“Stien Skulptor.”

Voldemort swatted away the stone-colored curse with nonchalant a wave of his hand.

“Novus Incendio. Pugile.”

Harry again had to make a great leap to dodge the enormous fireball. Tom's second spell came streaking right towards him, impacting his stomach like a cannonball. Harry felt several ribs crack as he flew backward, slamming his wand towards the ground in the same motion that he had used to knock down Su in their first duel, but this time with all of his power. The earth quaked and split underneath Voldemort, staggering him and forcing him to nimbly move lest he be swallowed into the abyss. While he did so, Harry wordlessly levitated a large pile of burning wood and stone. The Dark Lord turned towards Harry with an appreciative smile.

"You have made progress..."

Before he could finish his sentence, he was buried in the debris. Harry leapt to his feet.

"You seem to like the fire, Voldemort. Have a taste of mine. Osum Crema."

This was the most powerful heat-based curse in existence. It would burn the recipient from the inside, igniting his or her bones. The beam that flew from Harry's wand was a mixture of red and skeletal white. The entire pile under which Voldemort lay buried burst into crimson flames. Tom Marvolo Riddle would burn with the village that he and his followers had themselves razed to ash. Harry started in the direction of the rest of the battle with the intention of assisting Hitomi and the rest in wiping out the common fodder. He stopped and took aim at the pile one last time for good measure.

"Avada Kedavra. I dearly hope that Hell has a very special place in store for you, Tom."

Harry had only made it a few additional feet when a harsh voice halted him in his tracks.

"It very well may, brat. But I have no intention of finding out now or indeed ever."

Harry repressed a shudder. Voldemort had somehow emerged from his blazing tomb, and his serpentine visage reflected the very

definition of murderous. His robes were charred in places and he bled from a wound in his head. Combined with his broken nose and cheek from Harry's earlier punch, one would be unable to tell that the Dark Lord has thus far dominated the fight. Tom had absorbed two Killing Curses and was hardly any worse off for it. It seemed that nothing would take Riddle down for good. Harry rolled his eyes and drawled sardonically, refusing to show any outward sign of his growing desperation.

"I suppose that it would be too much to ask for you to just kindly die..."

Riddle smirked, contorting his mutilated serpentine face into something more hideous.

"I'm afraid so. Crucio."

Harry swayed back to avoid the Unforgivable Curse, snapping off a pair of Stunners in return. Both impacted with Voldemort, having absolutely no effect. The Dark Lord grinned and hissed out a flurry of spells in response, ending by stabbing his wand at Harry like a dagger, after pointing first at him and dragging it to the right and up.

"Avada Kedavra. Neoccidera. Morendo. Crucio."

Harry just barely ducked the Killing Curse. Deciding that trying to keep up with Voldemort in a wand fight was futile, he opted to throw all caution to the wind and go with the only method of fighting that had gained him much success. He saw that Hitomi, Bill, Fleur, Alberto and company were boxed in and standing with their backs facing one another in a circle just to survive. That is, until help arrived in the form of an absolutely incensed Remus Lupin. He came charging down the main path, hexing and jinxing everything in his path. Five Death Eaters fell to his initial barrage, and he showed no signs of slowing down. And if Remus had come, surely other Order members and most importantly Dumbledore were on the way.

His confidence bolstered, Harry ran towards the Dark Lord, dodging spells as he moved. His ribs took another hit as the blur and silver Morendo curse grazed his stomach area through his breastplate, and

he took a portion of the final spray of boiling oil in the face. Running on pure adrenaline, Harry waylaid Voldemort with a forearm shiver, sending the spindly wizard tumbling to the ground. Harry fell with him and slid into a full mount position, mercilessly raining punches down onto Riddle's unprotected face and body. He finally reversed onto his enemy's back and grabbed Voldemort into a choke sleeper hold. Tom sputtered helplessly as Harry strangled the life from his body with vastly superior strength. He may well have been the most powerful dark wizard alive or indeed in history, but that was meaningless when Harry had him in such a position that he couldn't work a spell. Harry whispered in Voldemort's ear.

"Truly fitting, Riddle. You hate Muggles with every last fiber of your soul, and now you die not through a wizard's wand or an incantation, but due to a Muggle stranglehold."

The young wizard's taunt unfortunately gave Voldemort just what he needed. With a truly bestial scream, Riddle's aura exploded out from his magical core, sending Harry flying off of him and breaking the hold. A lucid black haze now surrounded the Dark Lord as he whipped his wand towards Harry in a wide sweeping arc. The very attack that he had often used to humiliate Malfoy was now being employed against him. Harry was sent flying towards the wreckage of Rosmerta's tavern. His head impacted against a beam and he fell into a sitting position nearly unconscious, feeling the cold steel of his kodachi on the ground next to him. Voldemort strode over to him, himself too winded and disoriented from the choke to properly Apparate.

"You have put forth a valiant effort, Potter, but a futile one. AVADA KEDAVRA!"

In a last ditch effort, Harry raised his ornate short katana to deflect the curse. The blade began to glow with the spell's emerald green light upon impact, finally shattering into thousands of pieces. Several connected with Harry's body, creating lesions everywhere and shredding the front of his basilisk hide robes. Ts'ao Chang's armaments were all that saved him. Riddle tutted with an indulgent smirk.

“You still refuse to accept the inevitable, Potter. Perhaps I will inflict another punishment upon you for your eternal lack of deference.”

Voldemort cast a second Dark Mark into the sky, calling his final two squadrons of Death Eater reinforcements into the fray. With Lupin’s help, Harry’s fighters had evened the odds and were pressing the advantage against the Death Eaters. This turned the odds against them once again. Riddle also made a complicated motion with his wand and muttered a complex incantation. Harry watched in horror as the corpses of the fallen Death Eaters and villagers rose and began closing in on his followers. They were all going to die, and Harry and his arrogance were the first in blame for it. He had to do something. Zharrghast’s voice sounded within his mind.

The time has come. We shall now fight as one. Surrender to me, my fallen angel. Call out for my power. Only I can grant the strength that you require in order to save them.

The damned omniscient cretin was right. He had no choice. Harry was on the point of accepting just as Voldemort had raised his wand to intone the Killing Curse that would inevitably end his life should he delay any further. And at that critical moment a voice rang out as hard and clear as diamond, radiating with a power and fury that very much shook the pillars of the universe and made the Elder Gods themselves tremble.

“HAR MEGIDDO ABBADON!”

The most powerful Light Arts spell known to humankind struck the Dark Lord Voldemort in a monolithic blast of pure white and gold. By all rights it should have slain the irredeemably evil creature in an instant. Only the Prophecy saved Riddle’s life at that moment. Harry felt Zharrghast shudder inside his mind at the attack and retreat back into the depths of his soul as he glanced over to its source. There stood Albus Dumbledore, swirling in a pure white aura that put Voldemort’s to shame, blue eyes burning bright with his archmage’s staff held aloft. The headmaster was visibly panting from the exertion of the ancient spell he had just worked. Every fighter present, be it Death Eater, defender, giant or werewolf, halted and stared in amazement

at Dumbledore. The old man turned to Harry and spoke in his most commanding voice despite his fatigue.

“Harry, the time has come. Fulfill the Prophecy and banish this foul creature to the afterlife. I stand corrected. He is the one man that is beyond all redemption. Finish it, for the sake of the entire wizarding world.”

Harry rose shakily to his feet without a word, save under his breath to the entity within.

“You can relax now, Zharrghast. The mean old man isn’t going to hurt you.”

The fallen god burst back into the forefront of Harry’s mind and snarled.

Silence, you impudent little churl. That feeble old man is nothing compared to me.

“As you say. I can feel your piss on my medulla. Be a dear and lend me your sword.”

Harry didn’t want to kill Voldemort with a spell. He would be decapitated, butchered like an animal. Only that would satisfy Harry’s bloodlust. He might have considered turning on Dumbledore afterwards, but that would have been in remarkably poor taste. The old man had after all just saved his life. Again.

Zharrghast nodded inside him. Harry felt the sword begin to materialize in his right hand as he sheathed his masterpiece wand. Dumbledore looked at the Demarr Devil Blade, the living form of the fallen god Zharrghast, with dawning horror in his eyes. Harry cursed inwardly at his blunder. Now the old man knew the depths of his connection to Grindelwald. Harry stalked over to the prone and kneeling Voldemort and raised the sword. But the Prophecy was not yet fated to be fulfilled. Riddle sprang back to life and screamed for all the world to hear.

“Lord Voldemort will never perish!”

Riddle again swung his yew wand in the wide arc, this time tossing one hundred percent of his power behind it. Both Harry and Dumbledore went flying, the former nearly thirty feet into the air towards the larger battle taking place near the village entrance. Both sides had begun fighting again with Voldemort's resurgence. He also saw both of his pets knocked out on the ground as he soared uncontrollably. He hoped they were alive. Harry threw off his tattered basilisk hide robe and extended his wings, using them to slow his descent and glide. He landed gracefully on the roof on one of the few houses still intact with the cursed chaotic sword still in his right hand. Dumbledore and Voldemort were now dueling frantically in the distance while his own comrades were being overwhelmed. Perhaps he could afford take a quick break and give them a hand.

"Look lively, swine. Death itself has come for you."

His manic dakaathi bloodlust back in full swing, he leapt down from the roof and split a Death Eater through the skull as he landed. Blood mixed with bits of bone and brain matter sprayed into his face. Harry licked the nauseating mixture from his lips with a psychotic smile. A second Death Eater fell to the Demarr Devil Blade, this time cleft in twain through the torso. He saw Hitomi nearby sprinting to dodge curses from three of them, two being from Voldemort's initial inner circle escort. They appeared to be twins. Harry impaled one of them from behind, letting Alecko Carrow's blood course over his legs and torso. The dumpy little witch marked his first inner circle kill. Her brother Amycus squealed in rage at his sister's death, but Hitomi kicked him in the head as soon as he turned his back. She winked at him and turned to deal with the remaining lackey.

"Save some energy for after the fight, Harry. I haven't been so turned on in my life. This new ninjato is perfect, by the way."

As if to accentuate the point, she knocked the Death Eater's wand from his hand with a quick motion and then slit his throat. A few feet away, Fleur blinded a giant with a Stinging Hex to the face. It fell to its knees in pain, at which point Harry made a quick hop and decapitated it. He was too occupied with marveling at just how much blood flowed through a giant's body to see another bearing down on him.

“Watch out, ‘Arry!”

Harry glanced over in the indicated direction, only to take the full swing of the giant’s club right in the sternum. He went flying through a house and crashed against a tree in the back yard. He miraculously managed to remain conscious, largely due to his armor, but was too shell shocked to defend himself against the enraged Amycus Carrow, who had broken away from fighting Hitomi to follow him and was now stalking him murderously.

“Yeh’ll pay for killin’ me sister, yeh filthy little half-blood. CRUCIO!”

The pain from Carrow’s curse was mild in comparison to his master’s, but it was still blindingly painful and definitely not what Harry needed right after getting blindsided by a bloody giant. He doubted his body had enough strength at the moment to fight the Cruciatus and he sure as Hell wasn’t calling on Zharrghast over this little lump. Not that he needed to, as an unknown assailant presently ripped his throat out and started consuming the raw flesh as Amycus fell to the ground oozing blood like a stuck pig. It was that big rangy werewolf from Voldemort’s escort, though he had since discarded his Death Eater’s robes and was now wearing only a pair of worn trousers. Fenrir Greyback lazily picked a piece of human skin out of his teeth and grinned maniacally at Harry. It wasn’t a full moon out, so he was in his human form. Greyback’s voice sounded like a rasping bark.

“Been watchin’ you fight here for awhile, kid. A human that can understand the thrill of the hunt and shares my tastes as well. I like that, and you’ve got more balls than all these other flobberworms put together. So maybe I think I’m gonna give you a hand from now on. Name’s Fenrir Grayback, by the way. I sired your buddy Lupin. Not that he appreciates it like he ought to. Bloody domesticated house puppy, that one.”

Harry smiled despite the current battle situation. He liked this character. Greyback was disgustingly savage and brutal, and he reveled in it.

“Now might not be the proper time to exchange pleasantries, Fenrir.”

“Right you are, then. Let’s go shred us some fresh meat. I’m still a mite hungry.”

“By all means, feast to your heart’s content.”

Greyback’s feral grin broadened as he let out a piercing battle howl and leapt back into the fight, this time for the opposite force. Harry glimpsed him ripping apart three Inferi at once as a dozen other werewolves emerged from their hiding spot in a nearby forest and followed their alpha male’s call into battle. This fight had thus far been costly for both sides. Sixteen Death Eaters and a giant were already dead for Voldemort’s forces, as well as one Shinn Kohaku ninja, two of the Mexican Aurors and nine of the desperadoes for his own. Harry was momentarily annoyed upon seeing that all of his raiding parties had apparently been recalled and funneled here without his consent. Bill was at this point seriously injured on the ground, having run into the path of a curse to protect Fleur and then taking several others as he went down. The Hogwarts staff had arrived while Harry was talking to Greyback. Sadly, one of them had already fallen. Professor Sprout appeared to be a victim of the Killing Curse. Still, the battle was now becoming a rout with the likes of Flitwick and Moody fighting on the side of the defenders, not to mention Harry himself. He came around and trained his wand on a Death Eater that was about to curse Alberto in the back.

“Neken.”

The dark wizard fell to his knees, lungs exploded. He’d be dead soon enough. Alberto glanced over at him and nodded before turning back to his opponent.

“Have a taste of the caliente, gringo. Incendio.”

The Death Eater caught on fire and fell screaming to the ground. A woman, judging from her cries. Harry dispatched her with a quick Bludgeoning Hex to the temple, splattering the contents of her head.

“Had to get at least few with my wand, you know. Wouldn’t want to stray too far away from the basics.”

Alberto smirked grimly. Harry's battle lust was then felled in a single instant. Lupin dispelled a pair of Ineri but didn't see the Death Eater taking aim behind him.

"Koden Silvus!"

A whip made of pure molten silver flew out from a large, fierce-looking Death Eater's wand, striking Moony right in the small of the back. The last Marauder wasn't even able to scream out. He fell dead instantly upon the spell making contact. Harry froze on the spot. Remus Lupin had just been killed in battle. The Marauders were now but a memory. Harry immediately let out an inhuman scream and rushed at the Death Eater responsible, intent on cleaving him into a million tiny pieces with the Demarr Devil Blade. Even that was denied him, as Greyback and every other werewolf present immediately fell upon the culprit for killing one of their own, bludgeoning and shredding him into a slaughtered mess of ruined flesh. Harry would have his vengeance. His bloodlust was for the moment replaced by unadulterated and limitless hatred. Zharrghast piped back in to instigate.

The werewolves have punished the killer, but his master lives still.

"Not for long, Zharrghast. Voldemort dies, right here and now."

Harry proceeded to funnel every last ounce of chaotic energy that his body could muster into his left hand. He made a direct path towards where Voldemort and Dumbledore were having it out in the square, the very essence of death burning within his forest green eyes.

As he left the fray, the dozen or so Death Eaters and solitary giant still standing retreated down the path towards the castle a short ways in order to regroup and make their stand. Harry glimpsed Greyback and the other werewolves disappearing into the forests, but had no doubts that he'd hear from the psychotic lycanthrope again in the near future. The Shinn Kohaku and Alberto and company were likewise gathering their casualties and pulling back, not wanting to be around for the aftermath of this whole affair. Harry would have

appreciated their subtlety if not for his current narrow-minded fixation on eviscerating Voldemort.

Lord Voldemort had mixed feelings as he dueled with his oldest enemy. Fighting with Potter had taken much more out of the Dark Lord than he would like to acknowledge. He had made the serpentine wizard bleed in combat, a feat that had not been accomplished since his leaving that damnable orphanage for Hogwarts all those decades ago. The boy had grown powerful, even more so than Bella had indicated after her failure while attempting to raid the Hogwarts Express. She was currently redeeming herself for that defeat whilst attacking Azkaban Prison in order to free the remainder of the inner circle. Voldemort had hoped to simply recruit Potter here tonight and take him along to assist the Dark Lord in breaking the Ministry's insular jail. The proverbial butcher's knife to kill the chicken. Regardless, Lord Voldemort knew, as he indeed always knew, that Potter was more liable to attack him than he was to join his forces. And so this ambush had been prepared with the knowledge that Dumbledore would surely come running to protect his corrupted little hero. Bella should have no difficulty liberating Azkaban without the old coot there to interfere. Her less than fond memories of the place would motivate her further to succeed. Voldemort was tired now, but Dumbledore was completely exhausted. Victory would soon be his. And then Potter would die as well.

"Crucio."

Dumbledore avoided the curse, breathing heavily as he returned fire with his wand. He had long since abandoned his staff, no longer having the stamina in his limbs to wield it.

"Deletrius. Avis."

Voldemort sneered as he blocked the first spell with the same shielding spell that he had used against Potter's initial barrage. The second produced only a flight of birds that circled the air above the old fool. Truly pathetic. At least the boy exhibited proper taste in curses.

"How the mighty have fallen. You can barely remain standing, old man. Karsado."

Dumbledore only nodded and smiled serenely as he deflected the curse, a far cry from the empowered archmage who had almost destroyed Voldemort those long minutes ago. Riddle would have given almost anything to tear those twinkling eyes out of the man's skull and feed them to Nagini with supper.

"Ah, that is indeed the case, Tom. But I am, as you have so kindly pointed out, an old man. Stupefy."

"Protego. You will address me as Lord Voldemort. Potter may be too young and imbecilic to understand the concept of respect, but you have no such impediment, unless you fallen even deeper into senility than I had thought. Avada Kedavra."

Dumbledore tutted sadly. He was mocking the Dark Lord, who was becoming increasingly irritated with every second this duel dragged on.

"Nearly always the Unforgivables, Tom. Surely you must understand the need for variety. With such a poor repertoire and considering your training, one could just as easily accuse you of senility."

The flock from the previous exchange swooped down in a cluster to absorb the Killing Curse. While Voldemort's vision was obscured by the act, Albus pointed his wand at the ground at the Dark Lord's feet and swirled it, causing the pavement to liquefy and turn into a pit of quicksand. Riddle hadn't expected the attack and sunk in to his knees. He cursed at his mistake and was nailed by a beam of silver light as soon as his vision of Dumbledore was properly restored. The attack stung but inflicted no serious harm. Riddle extricated himself by levitating his body wordlessly. He decided to take a page out of Potter's book, as much as it galled him, levitating a pile of debris from the nearby wreckage and sending it at the old man, simultaneously intoning a curse.

"Here's some variance for you, Dumbledore. Hjerne Fryser."

Tom privately felt that the old coot's brain was mostly frozen anyway at his old age, but perhaps that would expedite the process for the

remainder. He snarled as Dumbledore created a shield of fire to absorb the curse and quickly transfigured the approaching wreckage into a large pile of pink and blue socks. He was making no attempt to return fire at this point. He was merely stalling for something. And judging from the broadening smile on the insufferable old coot's face, that something had just arrived. Albus Dumbledore's merrily twinkling eyes were the last sight that Lord Voldemort glimpsed before his entire world was engulfed in a titanic pillar of pure chaotic energy, translucent black filling his senses and burning him seemingly straight to the depths of his corrupted soul.

(End Chapter Twenty-Three)

Author's Note: And there you have it. I don't know if the fight came out as well as I would have like, but I hope you all enjoyed reading it. I did this whole update in a single day. Most chapters take me five. That's how pumped I was to get this out. Now then, onto details. I just had to make Fenrir Grayback join up with Harry. He's the only character I liked in the sixth book. He's way too damned awesome just to be some Death Eater. I feel bad for killing Remus, but I didn't see any point in keeping him around any longer, while his death would accomplish something. It will piss Harry off enough that I can start to mold his character darker if I so choose.

I've seen some concerns about the melee weapons, and they may be worse after Harry's extensive use of the sword in this chapter. Don't worry. This isn't going to become one of those kinds of stories. As I hope I've shown in the fights with Voldemort, wand combat will retain priority. The swords and maces and such are backup weapons, except in the cases of Ron and Su. Ron's a crappy magical duelist, so he'll crack heads instead. And Su will use her weapons to do spells instead of a wand. And as for the end, you'll all just have to wait and see whether or not ol' Tom has bitten the dust this time. I hope Harry didn't come across as too powerful here. I tried to convey him as having gotten his ass kicked by Riddle for the most part, and having to resort to physical combat to be able to hold his own.

And wow, 86 reviews for the last chapter. That makes me happier than words can express. Keep them coming, folks. I poured my soul out on this one, so I really hope to see some feedback. I would have

thought I'd have more comments to make, but they elude me at the moment. Until the next time. Now I really need to update Happy Red Prince. Geez, it's been almost a month now.

And how terribly rude of me to nearly forget. The spells used in this battle come mostly from Daimen Darkstar's excellent Spells & Creatures compendium.

“Here’s some variance for you, Dumbledore. Hjerne Fryser.”

Tom privately felt that the old coot’s brain was mostly frozen anyway at his old age, but perhaps that would expedite the process for the remainder. He snarled as Dumbledore created a shield of fire to absorb the curse and quickly transfigured the approaching wreckage into a large pile of pink and blue socks. He was making no attempt to return fire at this point. He was merely stalling for something. And judging from the broadening smile on the insufferable old coot’s face, that something had just arrived. Albus Dumbledore’s merrily twinkling eyes were the last sight that Lord Voldemort glimpsed before his entire world was engulfed in a titanic pillar of pure chaotic energy, translucent black filling his senses and burning him seemingly straight to the depths of his corrupted soul.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Standing Between Life and Death – Five Rivers of Blood

Harry sneered victoriously as the chaotic energy dissipated around Voldemort. Due to his extended exertion in battle, his attack had depleted the last of his body’s reserves. He stood with his left hand outstretched and still glowing dimly from the sheer amount of power that he had channeled through it. Harry’s entire body was racked with pain as the sheer adrenaline that had sustained him during combat started to subside. The spell numbing his broken right arm wore off and he was only barely able to hold onto the sword. He dropped to a knee grasping for air, only rasping out a few words with a laugh.

“At last, it’s all over. Victory is mine...all mine.”

When the last of the smoke cleared, Harry inclined his head over to where his nemesis once stood in an effort to savor his victory. When he saw what stood there, he felt what easily amounted to his largest burst of emotion since his transformation. And it was sheer terror. The Dark Lord’s skeleton stood alive, the bones aglow with the translucent black energy with which Harry had made to vaporize him. Chunks of rotten scaled flesh hung from his form in various places, the rest piled on the ground around him. The skeletal creature still dripped with fresh blood. Voldemort’s black robes and yew wand were lost in the attack, but their owner had survived in this dreadful

state. The sight chilled every living person still remaining in the ruined village of Hogsmeade. Dumbledore's exhausted features reflected pure horror, dawning comprehension on his elderly face. Harry was the first to regain the ability to speak, but still only in a whisper.

"This can't be. Nobody could ever have survived that attack. It's just not possible."

The newly undead Dark Lord turned to regard the young wizard, his skull contorted in a sneer of its own. Harry then noticed a large number of black feathers strewn about the messy remains of Voldemort's ruined organic body. And from the back of what remained standing protruded a pair of carrion wings bearing the same plumage in isolated spots. Dark feathers. Harry understood at once, despite being ridden with shock. The Dark Lord had assimilated Harry's blood during the ritual to regain his body in the Little Hangleton graveyard and had inherited the young warlord's demonic traits as a consequence. Riddle had obviously not required the catalyzing effect of the ring in order to undergo his transformation as Harry had, likely due to the Dark Lord's staggering innate magical power. The Dark Lord's hissing voice was gravelly, air passing through a nonexistent throat.

"Ever your best was no use, Potter. Now you understand the full magnitude of my powers and the true might of Lord Voldemort. This is the end for you. I will fulfill this silly Prophecy and send you to your doom. Avada Kedavra."

Voldemort raised his skeletal right arm as he intoned the killing curse, as if he still had his wand. Harry got the distinct impression that he had yet to become aware of the actual state of his body. Riddle might have raised an eyebrow in confusion had he possessed one when no Killing Curse spewed forth. He gazed down at his arm and stared calculatingly at the bony appendage, all thoughts of the battle forgotten. Voldemort rapidly glanced over at his reflection in a nearby puddle of water as Harry conjured up what little remained of his constitution in order to mount a last charge with the Demarr Devil Blade. Though even his chaotic power had failed him this time, but no sentient being could survive having its head lopped off. Riddle chuckled mirthlessly at the sight that greeted him, joining the

headmaster in recognition of his newfound form. The sound was more than a little disturbing given his lack of proper vocal organs.

“Even in defiance you have served me magnificently. I owe you my gratitude. I have now truly mastered death, and you have helped me to cross this final threshold. Lord Voldemort always rewards his helpers. I shall therefore grant you the clemency of death now rather than forcing you to watch as your friends forge a path in front of you.”

Harry forced himself back to his feet and gripped the blade with both hands. Only then did he notice the condition of his left arm. It was hardly better than that of the undead abomination that stood before him. Holding such an enormous quantity of chaotic energy for so long had rotted away much of the skin and muscle from his elbow down, exposing corrupted yellowed bone underneath his bracer. His predominantly human body was not designed to withstand that much chaotic energy. Harry had abused a dangerous force and paid the price for his folly. But there was no time to consider the ramifications now. He could still control the rotten appendage to a small degree and raised the sword aloft for a powerful swing. He glimpsed Dumbledore raising his wand behind Voldemort's back.

“You talk too much. You are wandless and broken. I really have no clue what you have become, but I somehow doubt that I'll have any need to care. Now with your head.”

Harry sprung at Voldemort with a piercing war cry as Albus snapped off a beam of molten white light. Riddle shook his carrion head imperceptibly and vanished in a cloud of noxious black gas. The Demarr Devil Blade passed right through where its target's head had just phased out of existence and collided with Dumbledore's spell. The magic was absorbed harmlessly into the cursed brand's pulsating dark matter blade.

“Until the next time, Potter. This night marks only the beginning.”

Harry spat at the ground in disgust as Voldemort withdrew from the battlefield. He had landed gingerly from his leaping slash and his legs now hurt as much as the rest of his body. Riddle had escaped and Remus was dead. Several of Harry's soldiers had been killed and

Hogsmeade was a flaming ruin. His tiger guardians were wounded and perhaps dead also, not to mention Bill's current state. The dakaathi hybrid was in a pitiable state in his own right. There were cuts and lacerations all over his body along with several broken bones and a left arm that would most likely not be able to be repaired. This battle had been a dismal failure.

"That's right. Go ahead and run away, coward. I'll have you in the end no matter how far you flee. That much has been predetermined by fate. You can't escape me."

Harry felt Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder and turned around. The headmaster was leaning heavily on his archmage's staff. He was hardly any better off than Harry despite the fact that he bore no actual wounds. The reassuring gesture did nothing to calm the younger wizard's boiling anger.

"Let us return to the castle, Harry. It has been a trying evening."

Harry stared up into the old man's saddened eyes, completely devoid of twinkle but still shining with barely restrained tears, and nodded jerkily. He started walking out of the destroyed town towards the castle. He was unable even to use his cursed weapon as a makeshift walking stick, as its blade was more or less pure energy and would only puncture through the ground as if it were mere air. Every step was met with torturous pain. He heard a choked sob behind him. Dumbledore was openly weeping as he surveyed the carnage. Harry was only partially able to keep the derision out of his voice.

"Perhaps I ought to conjure you a tissue, sir."

If the old man was stung by his remark, his expression did not reveal it. He shook his head and a fresh volley of tears leaked out upon looking into the remains of Madam Rosmerta's establishment. Several large piles of ashes were all that remained of the voluptuous barmaid and her reveling customers, buried underneath scorched wreckage.

"So much loss of life. That we as civilized human beings are capable of committing such atrocities as this stirs me to the core. To think that

each of those slain this night and also every single person that took life have passed through the halls of my school. At moments such as this I cannot help but feel that I am a complete and utter failure both as a teacher and as a guardian to our world. I can only weep for all of these pupils that my lack of foresight has let down, on both sides of this war. For my nearly two centuries of knowledge and experience, I cannot still even fathom how these tragedies can occur.”

Harry didn't even feel the least bit of sympathy for Albus Dumbledore's internal plight. The old man was essentially accurate in his self-loathing. The headmaster's lack of tenacity and discretion as a leader and stubborn insistence upon pretending that all people were inherently good at heart despite mountains of evidence to the contrary did indeed contribute quite a deal to bringing about the current situation.

“You're still blind to the state of things. These Death Eaters are far from proper citizens. They're no better than animals, rabid wolves accustomed to and craving blood. I don't believe for a second that you didn't know exactly what Tom Riddle was the very moment you first laid eyes upon him, and you should have killed him then and there. Your emotional connection to your students makes you unable to truly condemn them. Not even the most potent alchemy can turn feces into gold. Most people cannot be redeemed, no matter how great the effort. You would do best to save yourself the effort of trying.”

Harry felt Dumbledore's gaze upon his back but didn't turn to acknowledge it.

“You are far too young to be so jaded, Harry. Perhaps in the future when you are rather older and somewhat more enlightened you will not prove to be so hasty in judging your fellows. But more importantly, that weapon that you hold...”

The young wizard rolled his eyes at the headmaster's condescending tone, but interrupted in an attempt to alter the subject before it got too deep into his lineage. He would handle the subject at a later point, hopefully when he was in better health and in a more suitable emotional state to deal with the wily old sage's games.

“...Is the instrument with which I plan to execute my...hasty...judgment, with no regard to your pointless remonstrations. I am well aware of the fact that you recognize this brand from your past and rest assured that you will receive a full explanation soon enough. And little more than a moment ago you impressed upon me that Riddle was beyond any hope of redemption. Surely a direct contradiction to your own sickeningly forgiving logic.”

Dumbledore shook his head in acknowledgement of the fact. Harry momentarily considered commenting on the fact that the old man's persecution of Alphonse Evans had been equally contrary to the foolish maxims that he espoused, but decided that it would be more prudent not to return to that discussion at the present.

“Indeed, it pains me to admit that Voldemort has apparently fallen far too deep into the arcane to be saved. His current state proves that beyond any doubt. Only a wizard lacking even the faintest glimmer of light within his soul could have been restored from death as a Lich. I had always feared that these circumstances would come to pass when Tom first began dabbling in Necromancy. Inferi such as those you saw tonight were a common sight during his first rising. I have likewise always held out the slightest bit of hope that he would not allow the darkness to corrupt him completely, but it would appear that I have prayed in vain. In his lust for power he has bartered his soul.”

“I've never heard of a Lich before. He only looked like a pathetic skeleton to me.”

“I am afraid that he is much more than that, Harry. Liches are the most powerful dark warlocks in existence, bearing magical powers far surpassing those attainable for a living wizard, and only a few have existed in recorded history. Tom will now be able to command the most ancient and forbidden of arcane sorceries and resurrect full hordes of the walking dead to fight at his bidding. Liches are also borderline immortal. They do not age as normal beings do or perish due to natural causes, given that they are not truly alive. It would seem that through becoming death, Lord Voldemort has finally mastered it as he has dreamed for so long. We may well now be facing an invincible opponent.”

Harry grinned ferociously, grimacing slightly in pain. No opponent was unbeatable. Whether he was Lich or a bitch or something else mattered not. Harry would separate Voldemort's skull from his spine with one fatal stroke just the same and that would be the end of everything. But perhaps it would be best not to underestimate him again. Harry wasn't so deluded as not to understand that this humiliating setback had occurred due to his own arrogance. They were now coming on the edge of Hogsmeade. Hitomi's flat had been one of the few buildings to weather the Death Eater onslaught. Then again, Kenzo had known about the attack in advance and had likely warded his home to resist spell damage. Several Aurors were presently Apparating onto the scene, most bearing at least minor injuries. Harry absentmindedly wondered what they had done to get hurt.

"Now that's an encouraging prognosis. Don't tell me you're giving up already."

Albus shook his head slowly and frowned, his dimmed eyes reflecting a grim resolve..

"Certainly not, Harry. We are both still standing and the Prophecy is still valid. Hope will always flourish so long as you remain alive. Nonetheless, I am most disappointed with your reckless actions. Look around you. This village is now in ruins and its inhabitants slaughtered because you failed to warn us of the coming attack. I am fully aware of the fact that Tom owed you a recruitment offer months ago mentioning this occasion. Certainly you endeavored to destroy him alone and fulfill the Prophecy on your own terms, fueled by the memory of your parents' demise on this same night fifteen years ago. Know that this war is not defined by your personal vendetta, dear boy. I realize that I can no longer dictate your actions, nor will I make the attempt. Regardless, consider this old man's advice and think long and hard on the suffering that your scheming has borne."

Harry nodded curtly, this time unable to deflect one word of the old man's chastisement. He was solely to blame for this entire mess. Voldemort likely would have attempted to lay waste the village regardless of his actions, but had he not tried to fight all on his own

then the citizens could likely have been evacuated and a proper defense established. Harry was enraged at his predicament. Filled with self-revulsion for making such an enormous mistake. Indignant about Dumbledore having the audacity to rub it in his face. Boiling with hatred towards Voldemort for causing this destruction and making him look like a total weakling.

Harry resolved never to allow this to happen again. He would ignore his pride and consider his moves logically from that moment on. He would consider his advisors' words when they cautioned against his plans. He would turn all available resources in this war to his own advantage and seize control of everything at the proper moment. And above all else, he would make every effort to give the reanimated creature known as Lord Voldemort the bloodbath that he so craved. The Dark Lord was correct. Tonight's battle was only the beginning of a war that Harry fully aimed to finish. That promise caused the dakaathi prince to turn from his previous path that had led along some thin line between light and darkness in favor of one that brooked a full acceptance of the demon within. Riddle and all who supported him would be culled. No exceptions. No remorse. No pity.

"Do rest assured of that, sir. I intend to remember this fiasco for a long time. But for the moment, perhaps I should probably go and seek medical treatment. It would be a true shame to have survived a slaughter like this only to bleed dry in the aftermath."

Albus very nearly flinched at the newfound coldness in Harry's voice. He could visibly tell that something important had just now snapped within the younger wizard. The old man regained himself and smiled, a slight twinkle returning to his eye.

"A wise decision, Harry. I have no doubts that Poppy will be most delighted to see you. She has rather sarcastically mentioned that she intends to set a bed in her ward on permanent reserve for you. As for myself, one of Professor Snape's restorative potions ought to have me as good as new. Rest well. We will have much to discuss later."

Harry stalked away without so much as a word of thanks to his elderly headmaster for saving his life a third time. He reached for his emerald snitch necklace in order to activate his Portkey and save himself the

strain of walking uphill to Hogwarts, only to find it missing. It must have fallen off during the battle. He simply lacked the wherewithal to perform a Summoning Charm to retrieve it. The weight of the Demarr Devil Blade was becoming too much for him to bear. As he realized it, the weapon dematerialized from his hand just as quickly as it had come when requested. As the path's incline became more and more steep, Harry's ravaged and exhausted body gave out on him at last. He fell into unconsciousness close to the edge of the school grounds. Harry awoke several hours later in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts stripped down to his boxers with his ruined left arm tightly wrapped in a cloth. All of the minor wounds that he had incurred in the fight had been completely healed and his broken right wrist had been properly mended. The medical ward was filled with the injured. Madam Pomfrey was not present at the moment, but would be around soon. Bill was also conscious at this point and being doted over by Fleur. His upper body was covered in bandages due to his extreme curse wounds. The eldest male Weasley stared straight ahead and had a tortured look on his features that Harry couldn't quite place. Cho was asleep on a chair next to Harry's bed and Neville Longbottom was standing vigil in front. Hitomi was present as well, but was assisting the matron with treating the patients.

"We were starting to think that you might never wake up."

Harry turned his head slowly and noticed Su Li sitting on his bed to his right, dressed in her battle equipment as if she had been in a fight. Two additional sets of silver breastplates and leggings rested against a far wall. They most likely belonged to Neville and Cho. Somebody among his vassals had apparently surmised where he was headed and had mustered the cavalry to the rescue. He placed a hand on Su's shoulder and used her as a crutch to shift himself into a seated position on the bed as he laughed mirthlessly.

"There's no way I'd let myself die that easily. I still have too much left to accomplish."

Su smiled uncomfortably, visibly unsure whether she should be pleased that he had regained consciousness or worried about the foreign inflection permeating his voice. There was a nearly indiscernible hint of something present that even Harry himself could

not really identify. She went over to nudge Cho awake as Fleur finished wrapping Bill's arm and spoke in a tired voice.

"And 'zat should do it. But I 'zink you should rest more, Bill. You were 'urt badly."

Bill shook his head angrily, in response to which Harry raised a confused eyebrow.

"You think wrong, then. What I need to do is to get the Hell out of here and go comfort my mum and siblings. Fleur, thanks for patching me up. I love you and I'll see you later. Harry, it's good to see that you 're awake. I'd steer clear of Ron for awhile. He's not exactly quite himself right now. I'll let the family know that you're okay as well."

The redhead left the common room without looking back. Neville turned around with a somber facial expression of his own and offered an explanation.

"Most of the Death Eaters attacked Azkaban while you and Voldemort were having it out down in the village. They brought along about a dozen or so giants and all the Dementors also. Dumbledore's people were sent to help the Aurors defend the prison while he and the teachers rushed out to Hogsmeade. Every spare wand in the DMLE moved to relieve Azkaban also. Even Madam Bones."

That explained the relatively small number of inner circle followers that Voldemort had brought as his escort to his confrontation with Harry. Riddle had employed the exact same strategy as the young warlord in using their battle as a decoy for another operation. Harry's attempt had never even taken off, not that he could really complain about the fact. He would surely be dead now had his fighters not returned to keep the Death Eaters occupied while he dueled the Dark Lord. He doubted that even combined Order and Ministry forces would have been able to hold back a horde the likes of which Neville had just described. And Bill had not mentioned his father when leaving. The conclusion was rather obvious. Arthur Weasley had been killed during the battle at Azkaban.

"I saw a whole bunch of injured Aurors funneling into Hogsmeade after the battle. Since none of them looked quite exactly flushed with victory, I'm going to assume that the prison fell and that Mr. Weasley was also killed during the battle. Voldemort has managed to knock the wizarding world down hard tonight. The fallout is bound to be most delightful. I can hardly wait."

Neville nodded with a sheepish smile at Harry's sarcastic tone. Harry noticed that the pudgy boy was sporting a pronounced bruise over his right eye. He somehow doubted that Neville had gotten into fisticuffs or anything similar against Death Eaters.

"Nice shiner there, Neville. Looks like you've been in a fight."

"We were, but I got this one afterwards. It was after we made it back to the tower and Professor McGonagall came and took all the Weasleys aside and broke the news about their dad. I think Ron was in shock for a few minutes, but then Ron snapped and started ripping the entire common room apart. He was screaming about how he was gonna kill all the Death Eaters and how the next Slytherin he came across would going to need a casket. Seamus and Dean first tried to restrain him and everything but both almost got their faces slugged in for their trouble. He threw a chair at Cormac McLaggen that hit me in the face instead. Hermione managed to distract him long enough for Katie to Stupefy him from behind. There wasn't anything else we could do. All seen us have seen Ron pissed before, but never like that. He was almost in some kind of trance, it looked like."

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment. It seemed that his oldest friend had finally taken that big plunge off the deep end. The Weasley family was a very close-knit group. Though Percy seemed to be something of a black sheep. Losing one of his parents or siblings was the perfect catalyst for making Ron's sanity break. He would now stop at nothing for the blood of their mutual enemies. The raven-haired wizard owed Arthur Weasley and now his widow an unspoken debt for so readily accepting him into their family during those painful years when he was essentially alone in the world. He would honor it by making absolutely certain that the man's children would all survive this conflict and also have their vengeance for their father's untimely

demise. Harry would turn Ron's psychotic rage to his own benefit to that end.

"Well, that's Ron for you. At least nobody was badly injured. He'll get his revenge in one form or another, I can assure you of that. All of the Weasleys will. Just stay out of their way when the time comes. And you'll have yours as well. I'll serve up Bellatrix Lestrange to you on a silver platter. Only you may have to share her punishment with me. There still remains the matter of my godfather to consider, after all."

Neville seemed a bit frightened by the anticipation in his leader's voice. The timid Gryffindor glanced over to his left, obviously thankful for the emergence of a chance to change the subject.

"Brace yourself, Harry. Don't look now, but you're about to get tackled."

As promised, Harry immediately felt a crying raven-haired blur collide with his previously cracked and still extremely sore ribs. He grimaced at the impact but managed not to have the wind driven out of him. He hugged his distraught future wife gently and tucked her head under his chin. Harry's mind was put somewhat at peace by the contact but nowhere near to the degree that being around her might have before the night's battle. Cho could only hold still the darkness raging inside him now. The inner demon would never again be completely silenced.

"I seem to recall an identical greeting after the last big battle. Not that it's unwelcome."

She responded by pounding repeatedly on his shoulder with her fist. Fleur was eyeing the pair with amusement and a slight hint of jealousy from her seat on the hospital bed that Bill had just been occupying. He allowed her to use him as a punching bag until she calmed down enough to speak. He had after all almost made her a widow before the wedding had even taken place. Besides, he had allowed Hitomi to smack him a good one when he had wronged her. Granting Cho the same privilege was only fair.

"Don't ever do that to me again, Harry. I can't even fathom what was going through your mind tonight. I've already told you this once, but I

guess you didn't pay any attention. There's no need for you to fight this war alone. You can be so self-absorbed sometimes. Take a moment and think about how your death would affect everybody around you."

Harry really was in no mood for some ridiculous guilt trip or to be lectured again, but made no attempt to retort. Hitomi came over and fluffed his pillow. She had been watching the exchange between her lover and her unknowing rival as she cleaned and mended an injured Order member's chest wound with a look that spoke of resigned understanding. She met Harry's apologetic expression with soft eyes and a wry smile before departing from his bedside once again, maintaining her cover as a staff member as usual. Cho glanced up at her as well. Never one to be wholly oblivious, the Chinese girl chewed on her lip suspiciously as she took in the kunoichi's expression and Harry's. He never caught the gesture, and his current convalescent state and the presence of others in the room stopped her from saying anything. Harry was the one to speak again.

"I had my reasons for going and I certainly thought that I knew what I was facing, though it turns out that I was sorely mistaken on both fronts. But if it will make you feel more secure, I'll promise to bring you along to the next tango with death. But do me a favor and make absolutely certain that you know all the steps beforehand, sweetheart. Against the likes of Voldemort, one single stumble will invariably be your last. Though it would seem that you got to have some fun tonight without me anyway."

"Not all that much, really. We all came out to help you but the Death Eaters were already running for higher ground when we arrived. I think they just lost the will the fight when we cut off their retreat. We took down six with our first barrage and the teachers got a couple more from the other side. The rest just Disapparated away from the fight. We didn't manage to catch anybody worth mentioning. None of us got hurt either, though."

"Well, it's good for experience if nothing else. I hope you killed some of them at least."

Cho jerked her thumb over at Su and responded in a low whisper.

“She got one with some odd blood poisoning curse, though most of us were just trying to incapacitate them. I really am going to have to make her teach me some of that Chinese black magic one of these days. Rather shameful how ignorant I am of my own culture’s spells. The only one I really know is that spell I got Roger with on the train. I can still hardly believe that he became a Death Eater. A total disgrace to the entirety of Ravenclaw House.”

Su looked away with a blush when Harry glanced approvingly at her. He had never heard that Cho’s own former Quidditch Captain was among the Death Eaters that she had killed on the train. He had always assumed that Voldemort’s supporters came out of Slytherin for the most part. Perhaps it would be worth the effort to investigate and root out the filth in the other three houses also. Any that he might find in his Gryffindor would suffer untold torment before being purged. The snakes were already living on borrowed time. Hogwarts would have to become one cohesive unit in order to face up to this transformed Dark Lord. Madam Pomfrey’s arrival disrupted any further scheming.

“Once again, Mister Potter, your unparalleled ability to nearly off yourself amazes me. Miss Chang, I would very much appreciate it if you would cease smothering my patient.”

Cho sent the school healer an annoyed glare and removed herself from Harry’s bed.

“There’s an emergency Prefect’s meeting in about an hour anyway. I suppose I’ll just go and arrive little early. I’ll be back as soon as I can, Harry. It’ll probably be a few hours though. The whole school’s in a total uproar after the attacks last night.”

“For good reason, if you ask me. Have fun, princess.”

As soon as Cho was gone, Madam Pomfrey turned back to Harry with a tut.

“Now then, I’ve managed to heal most of your cuts and broken bones and keep you from running dry in the meantime courtesy of almost

half of Professor Snape's stock of Blood Replenishing Potions. But for the life of me I can't figure out what sort of injury you've managed to inflict upon your left arm. I've just gotten back from consulting with some of the senior staff at Saint Mungo's. None of them were able to shed much light onto the subject either. It appears to be mostly decomposed, but any known curse with similar effects would have taken the bone right along with the flesh."

Harry gave an intentionally cryptic explanation. Somebody had obviously explained his wings to the other occupants of the room, as he was getting no surprise on that front.

"Call it my punishment for abusing one of my special gifts. You'll never see another case like it again. As the arm is still quite ruined, I'm going to assume that no accepted remedy has managed to repair the damage at all."

"I'm afraid so, and that's not all. I've placed a Preservation Charm on it and kept it wrapped since you were brought it here, but that's only staying the inevitable. We've removed all of the loose skin and muscle tissue as well, but the corruption will no doubt spread. The only option I can see is to amputate the limb. Otherwise the condition could come to impact your entire body."

Harry took the news with closed eyes. Upon first seeing the effects of overusing his chaotic power on the battlefield he guessed that his arm was beyond repair. Still, he couldn't afford to just lose it. Demonic magic was far too great of an advantage to squander. Even if the limb could be repaired, the flesh would just decompose again the next time a desperate situation required him to go all out with chaotic energy. The best scenario would be for him to amputate the arm and replace it with an enchanted living mineral substitute similar to Wormtail's silver hand, though he would employ something better suited to his needs. The procedure was classified as minor Dark Arts and frowned upon in traditional wizarding medicine, and also required an open wound with living tissue for the metal or gemstone to bond to, or so Harry had read in his ancestor's tomes.

"That's more or less what I had assumed from the start. However, you must understand that my position in this war requires me to have

two functional arms. Outright losing my left would cripple me against Voldemort and get me killed in an instant. I want to replace it with a living mineral substitute.”

The matron looked at Harry sympathetically and shook her head in the negative.

“Mister Potter, I am unsure whether or not you are aware, but I regret to inform you that method you speak of requires the use of dark magic. I will have to request the headmaster’s approval before we can even consider it, and I find it unlikely that he will approve given his traditional stance on the issue of Dark Arts.”

Su stared at Harry with a searching look from her position next to the chair in which Cho had been sleeping. She was standing directly in Madam Pomfrey’s blind spot. The two frequent bedroom partners seemed to be on the same wavelength, as she silently drew her wand up Harry’s nod. He smiled softly at the school nurse.

“That is indeed unfortunate. For you see, I just have no time for the old man’s scruples.”

“Obliviate.”

The small Chinese witch’s whispered Memory Charm caused Madam Pomfrey’s eyes to go a bit lucid, her visage filling with abject confusion. Fleur used a spell to put the lone Order member in the room into a deep sleep while Hitomi incapacitated an Auror by pressing down on a point on his neck. The remainder of the patients in the ward were either asleep or too caught up in their own troubles to notice the commotion. It would take time for Harry to get dressed and find a way to escape the school and travel to Gringotts, and he didn’t need that hassle that would result from the matron alerting the old man of his plans. He knew that some substance suited to his needs would most likely be stockpiled in the Evans vault.

“Madam Pomfrey, I would really appreciate it if you could get that painkiller from Professor Snape. This newly mended wrist is really killing me.”

“Oh, yes of course. Do try not to incur any additional life-threatening injuries while I’m away, as difficult as that may be for you.”

The older woman left the room with a titter as Fleur strode over and helped Harry to his feet. The alluring French girl stroked his bicep tenderly as she supported him. Her breathing was a bit ragged. The other hand trailed gently down his chest as both Hitomi and Su bore rapidly darkening expressions. So much for any ambiguity regarding her strange behavior around him. The quarter-veela was definitely attracted, which posed no small problem for Harry. He stared into her eyes and spoke in a voice tinged with humor.

“As much as I’m enjoying the massage, I’m spoken for. And I really do need to be dressed and out of here by the time Poppy dearest shows back up.”

Fleur jumped back as if Harry’s body were on fire.

“I am sorry, ‘Arry. I do not know what came over me. Please do not tell Bill about ‘zis.”

That suited Harry perfectly well, and he put her behavior out of his mind. Hitomi produced the clothes that Neville had been thoughtful enough to bring over from the dormitory after Ron’s rampage. Harry dressed in his red and black flame print yukata. He found that the destructive imagery suited his current mood extremely well. Still, the look was incomplete without his kodachi. The present from Hitomi that had saved his life.

“That went off smoothly. Now I need to find some way off the grounds. I can’t just use the Floo at Hogsmeade anymore and my Portkey necklace is nowhere to be found.”

Neville grinned and pointed at the table beside Harry’s hospital bed. His emerald snitch necklace was sitting in a bowl. A few of the gemstones were scratched and the entire piece was smudged with soot, but it seemed functional still.

“Blaise found it in the wreckage just outside The Three Broomsticks, mate. She seemed really upset when she gave it to Hermione.”

Harry had nearly forgotten. Madam Rosmerta had been Blaise's aunt. He briefly wondered how many of his other vassals had been lost loved ones this night. A small part of him acknowledged the need to drop in on the Weasleys later. Bill seemed to insinuate that his presence in their time of mourning wasn't necessary with his abrupt departure, but it was only proper for him to at least offer his condolences. His escape would be much easier now that he had his Portkey back.

"Good, this simplifies matter. Fleur and Hitomi, I'd appreciate it if you both came with me. I might hope that it won't be construed as overly racist for me to say that I don't entirely trust a goblin surgeon to carry this through without extreme pain on my part. Neville and Su, I need you two to make my excuses when Madam Pomfrey comes back and also if anybody else, especially Dumbledore, comes looking for me. Try not to make eye contact with the old man, or with Snape if that greasy git happens to make an appearance. They won't be able to do anything once I'm gone, but I don't want either finding out anything that they don't need to know through Legilimency or for them to be able to convict either of you as accomplices in this little escapade."

All four nodded, and the two women came over and placed a hand on Harry's shoulders. He activated his Portkey and was gone with that familiar tug behind his navel, his destination the same as it had been so many times before.

The Evans compound was surprisingly active when Harry and his two female cohorts arrived. Gringotts goblins were unloading massive amounts of gold and jewels into the treasure vaults. There were also large quantities of dark artifacts and potions ingredients waiting to be distributed, along with several priceless Dark Arts tomes destined for the library. A truly enormous stockpile of wealth that must have come from Voldemort's strongholds, indicating that Harry's ordered raids had taken place after all. A large albino goblin with lumpy features was overseeing the work. Harry walked up behind him.

"Quite a haul, I must say. We must have had a busy evening."

The goblin drew his spiked battle mace instinctually and jumped forward in order to size up the situation. He put away his weapon at once upon turning around and seeing his lord.

“Good morning, Lord Evans. We weren’t expecting you. Please, allow us to serve your needs.”

Harry chuckled and looked around the bustling main hall.

“In a moment. Tell me about this stockpile. I had assumed that my raiding parties were diverted from their tasks last night. They did after all show up in Hogsmeade and fight.”

“My apologies, Lord Evans, but I’m afraid that I don’t know the particulars. You will need to inquire into the matter with the chieftain. I only just received orders from above to organize the distribution of these spoils.”

“Very well then. I have need of him anyway. Send for him at once, and tell him to bring your most skilled surgeon down with him as well as the most powerful painkiller in his stores that won’t sedate me. I have incurred some wounds during my recent duel with Voldemort that cannot be treated through the usual means.”

The overseer nodded furiously and went over to one of the workers, yelling out Harry’s orders in the goblin tongue. Harry turned to Hitomi and Fleur as the creature did so.

“Fleur, do me a favor and look through those books that just came in. If there’s anything particularly unique, let me know about it. We’ve got a few minutes at least before Grilthauk arrives.”

Fleur smiled, though her eyes betrayed a hint of irritation. She knew the nature of Harry’s relationship with Hitomi and didn’t appreciate being given a menial task so as to allow them some private time.

“I would be ‘appy to, ‘Arry.”

The silvery-haired beauty walked off to the pile of magical tomes, leaving Harry and Hitomi alone. She looked wistfully around the compound.

"I remember when you brought me along here for my first trip out of the village. We had only met properly that morning. You mistook me for the Chang girl after waking up that day, and we had our first lesson later that night. It feels like that was all years ago now."

"Those were simpler times. Sometimes I miss them. I didn't get the chance to check on your grandfather after last night's battle. I hope he's okay. This mess wouldn't have happened had I just listened to his advice. He told me that going it alone was suicide."

Hitomi snaked an arm around Harry's waist and leaned into him.

"He's just fine. A couple of Death Eaters made their way up into the house but he sliced them both to ribbons with his two kodachi. Grandpa may be an old man but he's still quite a force to be reckoned with when properly provoked. He didn't earn the rank of village leader only through hosting the best sake parties."

"And speaking of Kenzo, I'm interested in hearing if you brought up our proposal."

She brightened visibly, leaving Harry convinced that everything was set. But before he could hear her actual answer, Grilthauk came through the main door of the compound escorted by another goblin. The old chieftain briskly strode to the couple's position.

"I've heard that you got involved in a bit of a fight this morning, Harry. I send my best goblin soldiers to carry out the raids while the previously assigned human parties moved to aid you in Hogsmeade. The locations were all completely deserted. Voldemort apparently ordered every last hand under his command into battle, leaving his strongholds open to attack. We made off with everything in his possession, and none of his adherents shall be able to withdraw more from our institution. I daresay that our efforts shall have brought his war machine grinding to a screeching halt."

Harry nodded his understanding. With that done, he had other matters to attend to. He would make the old goblin aware of Voldemort's newfound Lich status one he had squeezed more details on the subject out of Dumbledore somehow. Surely Grilthauk would have some input as to how to meet this new challenge, but Harry wanted to ascertain it fully first. It would be rather counterproductive to waste his followers' time pursuing sketchy information, after all.

"That's good, but I have more pressing reasons for being here. I overused my chaotic powers against snakeface and my left arm has been withered beyond use as a result. I need to procure a material more suited for handling demonic magic than my own organic flesh in order to fashion a replacement. My esteemed ancestor was the only man to ever travel to the realm where chaotic energy is used and thus I decided to look here first."

Grilthauk thought for a moment and turned to the overseer.

"Have that small stockpile of blood ruby located at the rear of the treasure vault brought here. Our lord has need of it."

Harry remembered the blood ruby from his first trip to the Evans compound. Grilthauk had said that it was a base material for the alchemical creation of arkanite ore, and that the dakaath used it as a form of intertribal currency back in the demon realm. An arm made of that particular gemstone would be a perfect conductor for chaotic energy. After a few moments the precious stones had been produced. They were indeed a perfect crimson and sparkled like sunlight on a clear lake.

"This will be perfect. Now then, I've asked for a painkiller because your surgeon is now going to amputate my left arm. This procedure requires living flesh to bond the material to, so he will have to cut just above where the ruined part ends. Fleur and Hitomi will make certain that the wound remains as sterile as possible."

Several other goblins were even then hauling in a small crude operating table from the small medical wing located inside the living barracks of the compounds. Harry took his place and the surgeon handed him a vial filled with a white potion. He swallowed the whole

volume in one gulp and felt his entire body numbing. Hitomi unwrapped his destroyed arm and winced at the sight that greeted her. Despite the preservative charms worked into his bandages, the bone was turning a sickly brownish color and the skin just about the rot was beginning to decay. The nameless goblin surgeon spoke.

“Please brace yourself, Lord Evans. This will be very painful, even with the potion.”

Harry did just that, alternating his gaze between Hitomi and Fleur and the small pile of gemstones on the ground. He screamed in pain with the surgeon performed an incantation in the goblin tongue and severed his left arm from his body mere millimeters below the elbow joint. Hitomi ran over and grasped his other hand.

“Harry, you have to shut out the pain. Do the spell now before you bleed out.”

Harry took a deep breath as Fleur removed his masterpiece wand from the belt of his yukata and placed it in his right hand. He pointed shakily at the pile of gemstones. They levitated and melted, losing their physical forms and molding into one contiguous crimson blob. Harry focused his magic further, feeling himself beginning to dizzy from loss of blood. The blob formed itself into the rough shape of a human arm, smoothing as it starting moving towards the bleeding stump of Harry's left. He could feel the pain subsiding as the ruby attached itself to his flesh, the muscles of his lower arm tunneling into the gemstone and artificially reforming, creating a new living part of his own body. A hand formed at the far end followed by individual fingers that elongated and narrowed into razor sharp points. Instead of a standard human limb, Harry now bore a lethal claw arm composed entirely of demonic blood ruby. It felt as much a natural extension of him as his former arm ever had.

“By the ancestors, Harry. Such an terrible abomination.”

Grilthauk was staring wide-eyed at what Harry's psyche had created for him, as were Hitomi and Fleur along with several other goblins. Harry looked down at the floor beside him impassively, picking up the bloodstained skeletal remains of his former lower left arm and

removing the two rings, Khariana's and the Black family ring. He used one of the individual talons of his new artificial limb to gently remove the Potter ring from the place of priority on his right hand, replacing it with the Evans ring and reconstituting the positioning of honor using only a single hand instead of both. He could feel the chaos burning in his new body part. He no longer needed Khariana's ring as a catalyst to summon it forth. He choked out a nearly insane laugh as he spoke.

"And now to see what this baby can do."

He charged the claw with chaotic energy, effortlessly bringing far more power than he could muster without great difficulty before to bear. He lazily took aim at a pile of debris located near the library and fired. Instead of a small comet, the demonic magic took the form of a cyclonic torrent beam of translucent black, consuming and decomposing the waste and the ground underneath. The strain on his body was much less. He could feel it still, but had little trouble keeping the attack going. Harry dragged the beam across the stone floor and blasted several other targets around the room, including several tables and a particularly ugly idol that was among the artifacts taken from Voldemort's strongholds before finally ending the test. His grin broadened with every passing second. Such power he now commanded with total ease.

"...One final run. Let's see how it stands up to the strongest element in existence."

Harry filled the claw with chaotic energy again, but this time without intent of firing. He sprinted towards the arkanite door leading into the gateway to the demonic realm and leapt at it, tearing the blood ruby nails into the unbreakable metal. The resulting noise was loud enough to shatter glass. Grilthauk walked forward, followed by the rest. Harry was on his knees laughing like a lunatic. And for good reason. Five long and clean slashes showed in the supposedly invulnerable barrier, where his new "fingers" had made contact and raked downward. Hitomi lovingly touched Harry's shoulder and he rose to his feet, the frightening glee still present in his eyes.

"Harry, please. You're not acting like yourself. Get a grip."

"I've got it now. Between this wonderful new arm of mine and having the invincible Demarr Devil Blade in my possession I can finally destroy Voldemort once and for all. Have any new form you like, Riddle. I will rend you limb from limb all the same. And then I will shred the corruption that blights our world and skewer the great phoenix into yakitori. Hitomi and Fleur, let's get back to Hogwarts. I feel like going on a rampage."

With that, Harry whipped his head up to look at the damaged arkanite door again and began laughing maniacally once more. Even Hitomi, who loved him with all of her soul, feared just a little for what he had become. Indeed, the humiliating defeat that he had suffered at Voldemort's hands coupled with the death of Remus Lupin may well have broken that fragile dam in his soul separating his sanity from the evil festering beyond.

(End Chapter Twenty-Four)

Author's Note: Late, I know. You can thank Hurricane Katrina for that. We didn't catch the worst of it, but still got enough to keep me indisposed for a while between making preparations and getting power and Internet service back. Not a whole lot of action going on here, but I hope you all enjoy anyway. I've been wanting to give Harry the sick artificial arm for awhile now, so I enjoyed writing the end of the chapter. For a vision of what it looks like, think of Lady Deathstrike's claws from the second X-Men movie, except in crimson ruby and a lot shorter. Similarly narrowed shape but only about six to eight inches long. Sorry for any confusion there. I seem to recall another story using the "Wormtail hand" for Harry before, but I don't remember the title. I think it had a Harry/Katie Bell pairing. If any of you can supply me with the author and title, I'll give due credit.

Now, as for the fallout of the last battle...yes, I know a lot of you wanted Voldemort gone. But that just wasn't going to work in my desired plotline for a variety of reasons. First, it would have entailed Harry winning out a Halloween in the end. I did not want that to happen. He needed to get his ass kicked in order to slap some sense into him. He is wiser and stronger for his defeat, even if the former is brought a bit into question by the end of the chapter. Second, I need Tom around to keep the dark side unified. Trust me, I have my story

fully planned out already and the grand finale will be nearly akin to Armageddon. I also have plans for Harry to come into power, which will likely play out before the way ends. Prepare for this story to get a lot more frenzied. Harry's through with hiding out and waiting. People are going to start dying for being in his way, starting with one standing thorn in his side next chapter. He's headed back to Hogwarts looking for a fight and he's going to find one. I'm really psyched about Lich!Voldemort also. Credit for that idea goes to Midnight from the darklordpotter forums. Thanks goes out to that entire board for collectively giving me a hand when I was strapped for ideas as to where to go after last chapter.

Those of you who wanted the vassals to have their moment, don't worry. They'll be getting some action as things go on. I might have had more comments to add, but I'm ready to get this posted now. Hope you all enjoy and don't forget to review. Over a hundred with the last chapter, the first time I have broken that threshold. I'd love to see a repeat. I read and take into account every single comment I get, so make your feelings known.

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Chapter Twenty-Five: The Schism – A Ferret’s Lament

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Obviously, I'm making no money off this.

Harry stalked through the dungeons of Hogwarts alone in search of his chosen prey, as only imbecilic or suicidal of those within the school would dare be willing to give him the bloody fight that his enraged and somewhat crazed disposition called for at the moment. He kept his new artificial arm concealed within his yukata for the time being. Hitomi and Fleur had both been willing to give him the space

that he required. The kunoichi desired to return home and check on her grandfather's status, and the French beauty simply abhorred needless bloodshed. Harry barely noticed a young Slytherin girl's eyes widen as she noticed his presence in their territory and rushed back towards her common room. Playing right into his hands, the fool. He grinned nastily at the thought of what he was about to do to the procession of inbred filth that would come traipsing out of the serpent's den within the minute aiming to ambush him. Lambs marching to the slaughter. He had come intending to pick a fight with the resident head snake, but his students would do nicely for a quick warmup. He leaned lazily against the corridor wall and waited with his eyes closed. He would come and purge this Death Eater breeding ground sooner or later anyway. Might as well get a head start now.

"Seems like you've strayed a ways out of bounds, Potter. Awfully Gryffindor of you to stray into Salazar's dungeons at this hour."

Harry snorted inwardly and opened his eyes. It would invariably be Malfoy leading this proverbial charge of Gallipoli. Accompanying him were Goyle, Parkinson, Nott and Bulstrode from his own year. There were six others from various years as well. Most seemed to be seventh years, and one younger boy was present as well. The eleven Slytherins all had their wands at the ready, though there might as well have been eleven hundred of them. Harry could obliterate an entire army of pretended dark wizards and witches such as these with a simple wave of his hand. Draco and his goons amounted no more than cannon fodder. The ruby clawed demon hybrid responded in a conversational tone. The ferret would be screaming in pain soon enough.

"Boundaries do not exist for wizards of my power, Malfoy, nor do such pathetic adversaries as yourselves require any particular boldness to confront. On the contrary, you are out of your natural bounds for even having the audacity to look me in the face."

Malfoy and several of his colleagues reddened at the insult, though Goyle and Bulstrode were both seemingly too thick to understand those words that exceeded two syllables and therefore simply appeared confused. Draco appeared to be making a rather comical

attempt to size Harry up, for what no good it would do him. The latter just wanted him to attack and get things started, tensing his infernal claw in anticipation from underneath the folds of his Japanese robe. Malfoy spat out his reply as several of the others hissed.

“We’ll be correcting those beliefs in just a moment. But first, perhaps you’ve heard the latest news. Azkaban has been liberated and occupied by the Dark Lord’s faithful. My father’s a free man. Though you don’t really have any need to worry about either of them any longer since you’ll be going down right here and now. I just thought that maybe you’d like to know in your last moments.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed dangerously and his slight grin turned distinctly feral. He was quickly tiring of this childish banter. Compared to the likes of snakeface and the old man or even Snape, Draco Malfoy was a total intellectual cripple. And he was by far the smartest of the assembled purebloods. So it was nice of him to declare his obvious and doomed intentions vocally. He had given Harry a rather intriguing piece of information, at least. Voldemort’s assault on Azkaban hadn’t been just a raid designed to free his inner circle. The Death Eaters had physically occupied the place and gained a perfectly unassailable fortress that the young warlord was sure would soon serve as Riddle’s main stronghold.

“You’re so needlessly violent, Drakiepoo. And here I was just hoping for a nice little chat and a sporting exchange of insults. But if it’s an arse whipping that you worms are hankering for this cold November morning, then I’ll not deny you. Keep in mind that I’ve already sent your precious Dark Lord fleeing tonight and also that I may very well choose not be so merciful as to let you escape me as well. Whenever you’re ready, then.”

Harry reached into his subconscious and tapped into his aura as Hitomi had taught in her class. However, his purpose was not to repress his magical energy but rather to expand it. Grindelwald’s books had spoken of powerful wizards being able to dissipate incoming spells due solely to the power of their auras. Harry intended to terrify and humiliate these cretins as thoroughly as he possibly could, and could think of no better way than by negating anything they could throw at him without expending any sort of effort. His

senses already told him that Malfoy was the strongest of the current lot, and his absolute best was nowhere near enough to even begin to penetrate Harry's aura.

For his part, Draco's face showed considerable confusion upon Harry's mention of having fought with Voldemort. The ferret had apparently not been aware of his master's presence at Hogsmeade, nor had news of the battle there trickled down to the dungeons just yet. Being bereft of the latest news, he had therefore only guessed that the attack on Azkaban had been a success. The Dark Lord would have been too busy trying to tend to his grievous injuries to be bothered with calling a full Death Eater gathering this night. Regardless, only a few of the Slytherins maintained their resolve to fight with Harry upon seeing his complete lack of intimidation at their numbers advantage. The swirling translucent black and forest green aura protruding from him didn't hurt either. It wasn't as large or powerful as either of those from during the battle, but still impressive enough. Some started backing away. Harry tutted and made a motion with his now drawn wand, pointing it at the area behind them and jerking it upwards. Huge stone stalactites emerged out of the ground and then impaled themselves into the ceiling, creating an impassible barrier. The hunters had become the hunted. Malfoy and company were trapped like rats with their only path to salvation being guarded by the hungry cat. Nott was the first to comment.

"I think we might have bitten off more than we can chew here, Malfoy."

Pansy Parkinson, ever the Draco groupie, shrieked out a reply to Nott's intimidated words.

"Sod off already, Nott. You sound like a bloody Hufflepuff. He's only one person. Let's just attack and take him out."

Harry laughed, a mixture of coldness and insanity that caused several to tremble where they stood. These weaklings had never been involved in a real fight in their lives. The most that they had ever done was bully other students in the corridors. They were most foolish to have picked one of the most vicious opponents alive for their debut, and Harry had no intention whatsoever of letting them off easy. It was

time to instill the fear of Evans. They would fight despite the futility of the effort. He had literally put their backs against a wall.

“At least one of you has a small inkling of common sense. Not that it’ll help you now. None of you are running anywhere. I came for a fight and I will have one.”

Harry finally moved from his reclined position and stood in a nonchalant dueling stance. Every element of his mien seemed to scream total disrespect for his opponents. Things were just about to get started when a familiar female voice called out from behind.

“Shame on you, Harry Potter. Two hours out of the Hospital Wing and you’re already out getting into another duel. I wish you would listen for a change.”

Cho was alone and surveying Harry’s field of opponents with as much disdain as her fiancée. Her voice carried a distinct mocking tone, inflected with the knowledge that the Slytherins were no match for him. She had seen his aura before in some of their dueling practices, and so it came as no shock to her. Harry answered her without turning.

“Look at them, Cho. They’re trapped like the vermin that they are and you’ve arrived just in time for the extermination. And I have good news to share with you. Malfoy senior has finally made his valiant escape from Azkaban. Rumor has it that dear Lucius was bent over taking it full in the backside from a particularly grotesque Auror when his comrades arrived to rescue him.”

Cho’s beautiful ruby lips contorted into a saucy smirk as she picked up on his hint.

“Let’s hope the word gets out, then. The parents had best hide their young boys quickly.”

Harry almost burst out laughing on the spot. Merlin, he loved this girl more than ever at moments like these. He had indeed made the perfect selection that fateful day on the Quidditch Pitch during his third year. Cho’s sharp tongue practically ensured that his life would

never become boring with her around. The fact that she was as clever as a fox and as hot and capricious as an active volcano were icing on the cake. And speaking of volcanoes, Draco reddened in a matter of milliseconds upon hearing their tandem insults directed at his father and exploded. Riling the ponce up was always too simple.

“Don’t you dare speak of my father that way! CRUCIO!”

Malfoy’s poorly aimed torture curse streaked between where the two lovers were standing and the yellow jet of light missed them both by a long shot. Harry and Cho met one another’s eyes and both snickered as the former waved his wand at the opposition’s feet, causing all eleven to spill unceremoniously to the ground due to a fierce shockwave. Harry placed less force behind the attack than he had against Riddle’s escort earlier. He didn’t care to actually kill anybody here unless properly provoked, as it would prove far too difficult to explain to the old man otherwise. He had no qualms about seriously maiming them, however. He stabbed his wand at Millicent Bulstrode three times in succession. She screamed in agony as her kneecaps shattered, followed in rapid succession by her ribcage and shoulder joints. He proceeded to send a jet of acid into a seventh year’s face as Cho at last seemed to make up her mind to join the massacre.

“Pugile!”

Harry opted to take a quick break from tearing the Slytherins apart as he watched Cho’s curse fly towards a disoriented Malcolm Baddock. At the rate he was going, the fight would have been long over before any of them could have regained their bearing and that would certainly have spoiled his fun. The fifth year boy’s jaw shattered with a sickening crack as the curse hit dead on. He spat up a huge mouthful of teeth and blood a second later. Malfoy forced himself back to his feet and uttered another curse with a choked scream.

“That’s it...you are so dead, Potter! And your little pet chink dies with you! CRUCIO!”

Harry laughed in a low voice, making no effort to shield the dark curse, which covered just barely half of the distance between them before it started to disintegrate. He drew Cho into the unspoken

barrier created by his aura and pulled her up into a kiss even as the Slytherins attempted to rain curses down upon the couple with absolutely no success. It seemed to be the ultimate slight to their abilities, as they became enraged and began using darker curses and throwing their all behind them. Yet still Harry's aura did not so much as begin to falter. Nott was the exception. He was hanging back and not participating in the fight at all, instead staring directly at Harry with a mixture of fear and amazement. The spellwork began to take its toll on the attackers as they slowly ran out of energy and stopped throwing curses. Harry snorted disdainfully.

"What a truly pathetic display that was. I think I'm going to feed all of your broken bodies to Fenrir Greyback. I have no doubts that you'll all prove to be far more useful as werewolf fodder than you would have been as Death Eaters. Now prepare yourselves."

True to his threat, Harry quickly unleashed a crushing barrage of attacks. He first swung his wand in that familiar wide sweeping arc, blasting three seventh years into a wall and knocking them unconscious. Fresh blood trickled from the wounds created on their upper bodies. That left four active in the fight. Cho kept her smirk as she waved her wand at Pansy.

"Canini Magus."

Parkinson transformed into a pug upon the spell's contact. Harry chuckled at his girlfriend's sick sense of humor as he wordlessly levitated the hideous bitch and banished her into Draco, causing her to empty her bladder all over the ferret's face in fright as they both tumbled back to the ground. Harry then snapped Pansy's hind legs with a quick stab of his wand. She whined and howled loud enough to disturb the dead. Goyle lunged at Cho and threw a nasty haymaker right at her head. Harry's artificial arm finally made its debut and came out from its hiding place just in time to effortlessly catch the big thug's punch. Goyle stared stupidly at the foreign appendage for a moment, and then cried out himself as Harry snapped his arm with a quick flick of the gemstone wrist. He proceeded to score along the entire length of Goyle's arm with the claw, before slashing in a cross pattern over his upper body and finally raking his face with razor sharp nails. Draco's bodyguard was a mess of shredded skin and

muscle tissue from the waist up and was oozing blood. Harry rolled his eyes and performed a spell to halt the bleeding. He would live, but he would be mutilated for the rest of his life. No less than the fat cretin deserved.

“Again, truly pathetic. It almost astounds me how weak most wizards and witches are.”

Cho didn't reply, and Harry was more or less talking to himself anyway. She had taken down the last remaining seventh year while he was ripping apart Goyle. Malfoy and Nott were the only two left in the fight. The corridor was a cacophony of whimpering and moaning. Harry could hear spells impacting the other side of stalagmite barrier that he had erected earlier. It would hold for at least a while, though. He stalked the fallen Draco like a predator. His gray eyes widened as he tried to stammer off another curse, but Harry easily swatted his wand out of his hand. Nott took advantage of the young warlord's fixation to flee down the corridor, and neither victor bothered to stop him. Harry wrenched Draco up by his hair.

“You ought to be pleased, Malfoy. You've been trying all term to get my attention and now you have it. You've no doubt noticed my new arm. My duel with your master this morning cost me a limb but magic thankfully has few limitations. The nails on this ruby arm are sharp enough, but I'm rather curious to examine the other parameters. Perhaps you can serve as my guinea ferret.”

Harry backhanded Draco back to the ground with his artificial arm, severely bruising the fair skin of his cheek. The arm served as a decent bludgeoning instrument as well. Several slicked platinum hairs remained in his remaining organic hand. He then kicked the pureblood hard in the stomach, forcing him to cough up blood. He dragged the Slytherin back up again by the hair and rolled down the left sleeve of his expensive robes. The Dark Mark was exposed as clear as daylight. Malfoy attempted to sneer as the taller boy's forest green eyes took in the sight of the cursed tattoo, but the gesture faltered in an instant when Harry flashed a maniacal smile. Harry could kill this ugly albino rodent whenever he saw fit. The law of the land no longer held any clemency for Death Eaters.

“Let’s get out of here, Harry. This corridor reeks of dog urine.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally and followed Cho, hurling Draco several feet into the corridor wall. He had worked off his frustrations and tormenting ferret boy further bore no particular appeal to him. His fiancée sniffed at the sight of his bloodstained yukata and cleaned the ornate robes with a quick charm. Neither of them noticed the beaten and humiliated Malfoy going for his wand again behind their backs. Draco raised the milky white stick wildly and screeched the two words that would end his existence.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

The Killing Curse flew right at the small of Cho Chang’s back. Even a hopeless wizard such as Draco could manage a powerful Dark Arts spell with enough hatred behind it. Her reflexes were fortunately good from years of Quidditch and she flattened herself against the wall in an instant, allowing the lethal curse to sail past just inches from her supple body. She stared at Draco with obsidian eyes wide with disbelief and loathing. He met her gaze with equal malevolence as he attempted to send a second curse. He never got the chance. Harry’s claw arm impaled him just below the heart, driving clean through his body with the wrist protruding from his back. Malfoy became a human shish kabob, blood cascading from the mortal wound like a waterfall. His enemy savagely whispered the last words he would ever hear.

“How ironic, Draco. All those empty threats and you’re now the one experiencing your last moments. But there’s no need to fret. Death is just the next great adventure, after all. Though it’s a crying shame about your poor father. He survived that Azkaban ordeal tonight but he’ll be reading of his son’s demise in tomorrow’s obituaries, a dead son to go along with his faithless whore of a wife. And to think that I was responsible for both.”

Tears of shame and bitterness rolled down the younger Malfoy’s face. His skin was becoming more and more pasty as his lifeblood pooled in a small lake on the stone floor. There was no hope of salvation for him. Harry’s forest green orbs held not so much as a single trace of remorse or mercy. Cho was no more sympathetic to his plight, as Draco could see from her position behind his rival. His life was over,

ended at the cold inorganic hand of the one person that he hated more than anything in the universe. He had failed to avenge his family's honor, and would depart the world with the knowledge that his nemesis had defiled the very womb that bore him life. Harry held him up with ease, not even bothering to notice the barrier separating his small battlefield from the Slytherin common room had been destroyed. Severus Snape led the investigating party.

"I demand to know who was responsible for obstructing the..."

Words failed Snape at the scene that greeted him. Harry met his shocked coal black eyes and sneered, shifting the position of his arm to allow Draco's body to slide slowly down onto the unforgiving floor. His breathing was shallow and his eyes were glazed over. The greasy Potions professor rushed down to check on his favorite student. Adrian Pucey glared hard in Cho's face, enraged at the fact that the Head Girl had been a party to this. None would even look at Harry. All had known of Draco Malfoy's hatred for Harry Potter and had seen the Gryffindor icon's willingness to use lethal force against his enemies during the train incident. It was inevitable that things would eventually come to this. Snape bared his yellowed teeth and snarled at Harry with revulsion burning in his eyes as he examined his pupil. Harry stared back down at him with cold and unreadable eyes and brought his left foot crashing forcefully down onto Draco's neck. The ferret was put out of his misery with a single loud snap that echoed throughout the hollow dungeon.

"His life was doomed to end this way from the very first time that he crossed me. He tried to kill my betrothed and paid the price."

Snape's entire body was shaking at the audacity of the son of James Potter. Harry already had his wand drawn and was twirling it threateningly. Should this greasy git desire to be the next casualty then it could be arranged with ease. Cho placed a hand on his shoulder, as if to silently tell him that enough damage had already been done. He had no intention of catering her wishes this time, though. He flexed his claw as blood from first Goyle and then Malfoy dripped slowly onto the already inundated floor. The merciless young demon and hateful former Death Eater stared one another down for several long moments. Bloodlust danced in Harry's shining green

eyes. Snape finally turned and broke eye contact, causing the younger wizard to hump in disapproval. It only lasted for a short moment. Snape leapt to his feet and attacked, all professionalism lost in his rage.

“Ocular Reducto!”

Harry dodged quickly. He had already lost an arm today and had no desire to add an eye to it. He swiped at the Potions master with his claw, taking a chunk out of his billowing black robes as he leapt backward and assumed a proper stance. Snape was an extremely dangerous opponent, probably the most skilled and powerful among the Death Eaters aside from Bellatrix and perhaps Lucius Malfoy. Harry was far stronger, though. Pucey attempted to hex him from the side, causing Cho to get back into the fray and lock him in combat. Harry decided to go for broke on Snape.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The green wave of death hurtled towards Snape, who summoned a chunk of Harry’s broken stalagmite barrier to intercept it. Adrian managed to get a momentary advantage on Cho and sent a weak Stinging Hex at Harry. He dispelled the basic jinx with ease but got hit in his tender ribs with a vicious Stunner from Snape. Harry spat up an angry mouthful of blood as Snape taunted him. Cho had meanwhile fallen back into her rhythm and was annihilating Pucey. The Head Boy was unable to do anything other than dodge and shield. Harry wanted to end this quickly. Needing assistance from his girlfriend to defeat this greaseball would deal a major blow to his already reeling ego.

“You will pay for murdering one of my students, Potter, and that freakish little toy arm that you’re now sporting will not save you. You have been unfairly exonerated of far too many transgressions over the course of your school career and I will consider it my privilege to be the one to finally take you down and make you accountable. You have turned your back to the light and your use of the Killing Curse is the evidence.”

Harry sneered. Being accused of going dark by a marked Death Eater was ridiculous. He fired back with a spoken spell followed by a silent attack.

“That makes two of us, then. Let’s see if you can really stop me. I’ll bet this one brings back some fond memories. Pugile.”

Snape deflected Harry’s curse with a grunt, but then took a blow to the leg from Harry’s conjured whip of electricity. Harry charged forward and blasted Snape with a straight palm thrust from his artificial arm, flattening his hooked nose. A weak Stunner of his own then sent the spiteful professor sprawling. He got back to his feet gingerly, his sallow face flushed with indignation.

“Curse you and your bastard of a father, you insolent brat! Sectumsempra!”

Harry sensed something coming towards him and raised his claw arm to block. Snape’s invisible sword collided with the blood ruby and sent Harry skidding back a few feet. Harry had never seen that particular spell before in any of his tomes.

“Nice nose job, Snivellus. It’s a definite improvement if you ask me. I smashed your master’s into splinters down in Hogsmeade earlier this morning. Now the two of you are a matching pair, though I intend to leave you in far worse condition. Glycolycium.”

Harry intentionally aimed the curse to that it would hit the fallen Millicent Bulstrode should the trollish girl’s Head of House move to evade it. Snape cursed as he realized the rather ruthless strategy and was forced to expend a good portion of his magical reserves to shield against it. Defensive spells for higher end curses were quite draining on the caster, which was also why Harry tended to prefer outright dodging where possible.

“Sectumsempra!”

This spell was now beginning to annoy Harry, though he would certainly remember the incantation for future battles. He again

deflected the invisible blade with his artificial arm but was forced backwards and to a knee by the impact. He could feel the ruby beginning to vibrate due to the pressure. Snape sensed victory and intoned the spell a third time.

“Sectumsemptra!”

Parry with our sword. That false arm cannot absorb much more punishment.

Zharrghast usually never deigned to make his presence known in the heat of a conflict and so Harry heeded his symbiote’s warning. The fallen god’s voice was imperceptibly different than his host had remembered it being, almost holding the faintest hint of the young warlord’s own vocal signature. He quickly dropped his wand and summoned forth the Demarr Devil Blade into his right hand. Snape’s eyes widened in disbelief as the infernal brand materialized from nothing and absorbed his attack upon contact. Harry had seen it do the same to one of Dumbledore’s spells. Harry unfastened his robes as he stood. He could feel the old man’s aura approaching now. It was a long walk from the headmaster’s office to the dungeons, but Malfoy’s initial Cruciatus Curse would have activated the school’s detection wards. Several other teachers were with Albus. Harry stretched his wings to full span, allowing Snape to glimpse his true visage.

“Gaze upon perfection given human form, Snape. A lowly dungeon rat like you should not even stand in the same light as me. This demonic brand is the harbinger of your doom. Now get down on your scabby knees and accept your fate with what little decency a greasy pig such as yourself can muster.”

“I think not, Potter. Neken!”

Harry was already rushing forward when the spell came out. His movements were nearly a blur inside the dimmed corridor as he slide out of the spell’s way with almost divine intuition. He brought the dark matter blade down on Snape’s outstretched wand arm with a downward chop before the greasy man could find the time to react, severing the limb halfway between the elbow and shoulder. It was his

primary arm, and losing it meant that Snape would never effectively brew a potion or fight a duel again. Harry smiled coldly as his most hated professor sank to his knees crying and screaming, clutching helplessly at the meager remains of his right arm. He raised the sword slowly and pointed directly between Snape's onyx eyes.

"This is it, Snivellus. It would seem that Death Eaters make rather poor avenging angels. Give my love to my mum and dad for me, and tell Remus that I'm sorry. Also make certain that the lords of Hell put a home on reserve for your master. He'll be going soon."

"Cease your inane prattling, Potter. If you're going to kill me, then get on with it already."

He pulled the black back and placed his artificial arm on the handle as well, resulting in a bushido-style grip. Snape's expression was filled with anguish and hatred, but also contained a veneer of calm acceptance. He had fallen to his knees in pain and made no attempt to deny the inevitable. It gave Harry a sardonic sense of satisfaction to see that he had forced this bitter little man to bend to his will in his last living moments. But just as he began the fatal stroke, Zharrghast pricked his senses again. He turned just in time to dodge the Stunner tearing through the air from behind. Alastor Moody had his wand raised. Dumbledore, McGonagall and Flitwick were with him, all surveying the scene in horror. It was their worst nightmare, a pitched battle within the halls of the school. The retired Auror's magical eye was whizzing out of control as the other stared hard at Harry. Cho was bound and gagged with magical ropes on the ground, and was thrashing quite violently against her restraints. Harry banished them with a wave of his wand.

"That's two Hogwarts professors now that have tried to blindside me this morning. I'm feeling rather insecure around here."

Harry kept the Demarr Devil Blade in his artificial right hand and summoned his wand back into his left. He kept both trained on the teachers, though he had no intention of fighting them. Dumbledore was perhaps the most powerful wizard alive, and his three companions were all in Britain's top ten in terms of power and had decades of experience to boot. Any of them would give him all he

could handle alone, and so challenging them all at once with only a comparatively green and weak Cho to back him up was suicide. Dumbledore spoke in a tired but still authoritative voice.

“You will place down those weapons right this instant, Harry. Miss Chang, do not even think of drawing that wand. You are both to return to your respective dormitories and clean yourselves, after which will report directly to my office. I am sorely afraid that we must discuss your futures at this institution after this display. Minerva and Filius, please escort your respective students to their destinations. Alastor, if you would be so kind as to assist me in treating the injured. Poppy still has her hands quite full from Mister Potter’s earlier escapade.”

Harry shot Dumbledore a venomous look for bringing up Hogsmeade as he banished the sentient sword and helped Cho to her feet. She glared balefully at Moody for binding her without warning. She had left Adrian Pucey in a miserable state, thought she took a few nasty licks of her own during their duel. They both left the scene without a word. Minerva McGonagall’s eyes betrayed extreme disappointment with the boy who had long been one of her favorite students. Harry couldn’t have cared less.

Cho was already dressed and waiting when Harry arrived at the gargoyle in front of Dumbledore’s office nearly an hour later. Most of his friends in Gryffindor were in their respective dormitories, and his own was a ghost town. Neville was out somewhere. The three resident Weasleys were at Grimmauld Place grieving their father’s loss with their likely hysterical mother. Hermione had reportedly gone with Ron. Seamus and Dean were at the Hospital Wing being treated due to the beating that said redhead had dealt them. Harry had been able to do his business in the tower without being noticed. He had expected Cho to be distraught over the possibility of being expelled from Hogwarts. However, she seemed to be taking the situation calmly. It was almost as if she didn’t particularly care at all.

“Canary Creams.”

Flitwick gave the password to open the passageway leading into the office. Harry stalked lazily onto the spiral staircase without a word to the faculty escort with Cho similarly following a step behind. Upon

reaching the empty office, he glanced over at the ornate perch that belonged to the old man's phoenix. Fawkes was in his infantile state, indicating that he had burned within the past day or so. The baby bird flinched and refused to meet Harry's gaze, but neither did he appear to be outright hostile towards the young warlord, who only scoffed at the creature. Fawkes was very much the same as his decrepit handler. Blissfully ignorant of the realities of the world.

"Please come and sit down with me, Harry. All that pacing is making me nervous."

Harry nodded and enlarged the armchair that Cho was sitting in with a quick wand motion. He sat down next to her and moved to allow her arm to coil around his waist. He occupied himself by twirling a lock of her raven hair between his fingers, also tapping on the modified chair's armrest with his clawed hand.

"You're awfully calm. We may be expelled, you know. I remember you cutting me off down at the lake a few months back for fear of something like this happening. You should not have interfered in the fighting. None of them posed any threat to me."

Cho shrugged, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"I don't really care anymore. I was only worried about losing my chance at escaping from my father's clutches, but I've already secured my freedom from him with our engagement. We'll soon get married and then you'll conquer this country as planned. Some stupid Hogwarts degree won't matter at all then."

Harry pulled his girlfriend in closer. He leaned his head in closer and inhaled the soft scent of her hair. He cast a privacy ward around the majority of the room in order to prevent the portraits from hearing anything that might prove damaging.

"Ever the optimist. I hadn't really intended for anybody to die down there, but the circumstances do present a convenient opportunity for me to see exactly how far I can trust Dumbledore. After what took place down in Hogsmeade, I've come to the conclusion that we can't win this war without assistance. Our forces are too few. An entirely

new approach is in order. There will be either an alliance forged or a complete parting of ways between the headmaster and myself here. The decision will be left entirely up to him.”

“I don’t exactly understand.”

“I’ll explain everything later. He’s coming up the stairs now. Just follow my lead and let me do most of the talking. Keep your guard up at all times, but don’t involve yourself if things get heavy. And don’t make eye contact with him under any circumstances.”

Cho nodded her acquiescence just Dumbledore strode into the office. He was angry, far more so than Harry had ever seen him. There seemed to be very little chance of this ending well. The young warlord had no remorse about anything he had done in the bowels of the school, naturally. Snape and Malfoy had both attacked him first, and no person would ever make an attempt on his beloved’s life and live to tell of it. Dumbledore sat down heavily in his chair and spoke in a voice that seemed torn between harshness and outright anguish.

“Never once since the Hogwarts days of Tom Riddle has a student been killed within the confines of this institution. I have already taken statements from Professor Snape as well as several of the Slytherins that the pair of you callously maimed down in the dungeons. You are aware naturally that I will be left with no alternative aside from expulsion and perhaps even criminal charges unless the two of you manage to provide some extraordinary explanation for this madness.”

Harry took that as his cue.

“I’ll tell you what happened. After returning from having a medical procedure performed on my destroyed left arm, I decided to take a little walk around the grounds. My sojourn led me down into the dungeons, where I found myself ambushed by Draco Malfoy and no less than ten of his stooges. We exchanged words and insults, as is commonplace for Gryffindors and Slytherins. Cho arrived in the middle of the banter, and Malfoy lost his temper and fired the Cruciatus Curse at us. He missed, and we counterattacked. I will admit to showing little mercy in the battle, but they were all employing illegal spells as well. I’m sure that you can identify most of their

wounds, and Gregory Goyle attempted to punch a girl barely a quarter of his size clear in the face. I tore him to shreds with my new claw for his trouble...”

Harry paused for a moment and caught his breath.

“...She and I made short work of the goons, leaving only Theodore Nott and Malfoy standing. Nott seemed disinclined to fight and retreated when the smoke cleared. I roughed up Draco a bit and confirmed his status as a marked Death Eater before leaving him there with the intention of dealing with him later. Mere seconds after we turned to leave, he threw a Killing Curse at Cho’s back. She dodged it and I promptly impaled that little inbred bastard and subsequently broke his neck. She is my betrothed and I would not hesitate a second to serve the same fate unto any wizard or witch given similar circumstances. Snape and Adrian Pucey then showed up. The esteemed Potions master went nutters upon seeing Malfoy dead and attacked me as well. Pucey followed suit and Cho engaged him. You already know how all that ended. And that about does it.”

Dumbledore nodded and sighed, looking over at Cho.

“Miss Chang, please make me aware of anything you might have to add to Mister Potter’s version of events.”

“Nothing. Harry told everything just like it happened. We were provoked in both cases and that white rat tried to kill me.”

“I see. I do openly empathize with your motivations, Harry. Any action has merit when performed in the defense of a loved one. However, the fact remains that you have slain a fellow student on Hogwarts grounds. You have admitted to as much.”

Harry sneered at the old man.

“I confessed only to striking down a Death Eater, an insurgent against the government and a dangerous criminal, in the defense of my fiancée’s life as well as my own. I will also remind you that as a willing bearer of the Dark Mark, his life was officially forfeit according to Ministry law. I ought to know, the statute was named in my honor.

The fact that Malfoy also happened to be a student enrolled here is irrelevant.”

“That law applies only to Aurors employed by the Ministry, Harry. You possess neither the right nor the authority to take justice into your own hands. You should have incapacitated young Mister Malfoy and left him to the authorities.”

“I’ll take that as pure hypocrisy coming from the leader of an illegal vigilante group.”

Dumbledore inclined his head in acceptance.

“You are certainly entitled to that opinion. Aside from the death of young Mister Malfoy, there is also the matter of your cruel and inhumane treatment of Professor Snape. I will impress upon you the fact that your actions have ruined that man’s livelihood. He can no longer brew potions unabated due to the loss of his right arm. You have torn away his only passion in life.”

“He has been nothing but cruel and inhumane towards me since the first moment that I set foot into his filthy dungeon cesspool over five years ago. Just another of your glaring double standards, old man. I’m really starting to tire of this nonsense. She and I have told our story. Hurry up and make whatever trifling decision you will. I will not apologize for defending myself and my betrothed.”

The headmaster was silent for a long moment, and Cho took Harry’s hand gently.

“I have made my decision. Harry, you failed to mention in your telling of events that you descended into those dungeons in search of a fight. You also neglected to share the fact that you walled off the path back to the Slytherin dormitories, more or less leaving your adversaries with no alternative other than to provoke battle. A student is dead and ten of his classmates critically wounded. A teacher at this institution has been maimed. Most of these actions took place at your hands. I have long thought of you as my own grandson. Still, my first prerogative will always be the welfare of this school and the protection of the students residing within it. You have needlessly and

willfully flouted both through your actions. This I cannot condone. It truly breaks my heart to be forced to this, but I have no choice...”

Harry tensed in his seat, preparing himself to spring into action. A large tear rolled down the old man’s face as he pronounced the sentence.

“...Harry James Potter, you are henceforth expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Due to the special circumstances surrounding your case, your wand will not be...”

Harry interrupted Dumbledore’s tearful message a truly frigid tone of voice.

“...Close your big fat mouth already, you pretentious old bastard. You’ll wish that you had snapped my wand in just a moment when I use it to end your meaningless existence. But now that I take a moment to consider, perhaps there is a more suitable means to your end.”

He was out of his seat in a flash. Dumbledore went for his wand almost on reflex, but Harry was quicker. The Demarr Devil Blade materialized once more in his right hand and he pointed the tip of the pulsating chaotic blade a mere centimeter from the old archmage’s temple. Harry’s eyes glittered with pure insanity as he laughed at the ease with which he had rendered the great Albus Dumbledore helpless. Cho acted on impulse and snatched his wand from the top of his desk, with the old man being unable to stop her due to the infernal brand threatening to claim his life in an instant.

“Harry...it does not have to be this way.”

“I can see that now that it was meant to be like this. You must understand that the chosen scion of Alphonse Evans could never coexist peaceably with his murderer. I said that I would tell you all about the meaning of this blade that I hold in my hand, so be silent and allow me to confirm your worst fears. I am the heir of Lord Grindelwald. I have raised a great army from right underneath your crooked nose and I will soon take vengeance for my ancestor's death and then honor him by creating the utopia that he so long

desired. A world where iniquity and prejudice do not exist, and corrupt officials do not harm and mislead the people. You have failed miserably as the guardian of our world, old man. Magical society is sick and dying and you are the first in blame for doing nothing to remedy the situation. Now is the time for you to stand aside.”

“I will not, Harry. You have become far too corrupted to simply take my place as the champion of the light. But there is still hope for redemption. Turn back from this doomed path before you become as lost as Tom. Let me help you, my boy.”

Harry shook his head slowly.

“Too many people believe in me. I will never stop going forward. I will obliterate Riddle as fate has commanded me. After that, this world will belong to me. I will make my ascension to the jade throne and guide our world into a new age of order and prosperity. And you will fade into the annals of forgotten history like the useless relic that you are. I shan’t kill you yet, as the time isn’t yet right to reveal my motives to the wizarding world. You will instead serve as my personal witness, watching as everything falls into place and knowing that you are powerless to stop it. No change from your usual *modus operandi*, then.”

Harry lazily drew his wand into his artificial arm and pointed at Dumbledore.

“*Memoria Tempus Aeternum.*”

A beam of swirling golden light impacted with the old man’s chest. It caused him no harm, but placed an unbreakable bind on the information that Harry had revealed. It could not be shared with others in any form, including a forcible withdrawal via Legilimency. The only method through which the spell could be broken was to kill Harry. Albus would be forced to watch events lead to Harry’s takeover, but would never be able to tell a soul. The man who had killed Lord Grindelwald would be cursed to witness to the victory of his heir. Albus slumped in his chair as he stared at his desk. The old man’s heart was truly broken. Harry shook his head and continued.

“...I will depart your little sand castle as requested, but with the intention of turning Grimmauld Place into my temporary domicile. The Order of the Phoenix will be evacuated from my house and the Fidelius Charm dispelled by the noon hour today. The consequences will be unpleasant otherwise. I will now take my leave, as I still have a few loose ends to tie up here before going. Remain here and ponder how things came to this point in the meantime. Perhaps you’ll find your answer.”

Harry took Cho’s arm and led her from the shattered Albus Dumbledore’s office. She smirked and flicked his wand back onto his desk, along with her Head Girl’s badge. The headmaster had not the heart to take his wand and attempt to stop Harry. The old man’s mind returned to a similar cold night many decades ago, when a young Lord Voldemort strode away in an equally similar fashion. And indeed, all that he could do was ponder how things could have possibly come to this. And this time, Fawkes was unable to console him with a burst of song.

(End Chapter Twenty-Five)

Author’s Note: Well, that ended up being a bit darker than I had originally planned. My own heart really went out to poor Albus even as I wrote the final segment. Still, it needed to happen. I felt that Dumbledore almost had to expel Harry after what he did to Draco. I also think that Harry had some right to do it, given that he tried to kill Cho. In the end, Harry just needs to get away from Hogwarts in order to progress his evolving master scheme, and he needed to sever his emotional ties with Dumbledore in order to pursue them without any regrets. Perhaps there will be a reconciliation between them in the end. Don’t worry too much about Harry’s insanity from last chapter. He’s still as suave and manipulative as ever. He’s just getting even more ruthless.

Next chapter will have Harry start to redefine his plans and hatch the one that will put him firmly in power. This chapter, and the events of Halloween overall were the major turning point of the story. Now strap yourselves in for a roller coaster ride to the end. The big Harry/Cho/Hitomi revelation will probably be coming in the next

chapter or two, so stay tuned for that also. Hope you all enjoy, and please take the time to review.

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Homecoming – The Exodus of Hogwarts

“I think you’re making a huge mistake by letting the old man live, Harry. He’s exhausted and disheartened now, but he’ll make trouble

for you once he recovers. You should go back in there and finish him off now while you still have the opportunity.”

Harry knew that Cho was at least partially correct. Harry could never hope to find a better chance to put Dumbledore aside for good, but the action didn't entirely appeal to him. The old archmage's presence would more or less guarantee that Riddle would shy away from making a try on capturing Hogwarts any time in the near future, and for Voldemort to occupy a source of magic as powerful as the school would be a catastrophe. And Albus now represented only a marginal threat to Harry. The young warlord had seen that when confronted by the faculty down in the dungeons. Dumbledore was indeed mighty, but he was also an ailing old man who no longer had the stamina to survive a duel to the death against a wizard the caliber of Grindelwald's heir. Should things ever come to that, Harry was convinced that he could weather the headmaster's attacks long enough to tire him and then go for the jugular and emerge victorious. Half a century ago, Dumbledore had been the resplendent wizard and Grindelwald the weary geriatric. The tables had turned now. Harry stroked his girlfriend's cheek with a laconic grin.

“I retract my earlier statement. Vicious isn't nearly enough to describe you. You are a truly evil woman. I will not kill Dumbledore just yet. He still has his role to play in this whole scenario, though I'm not at all averse to cutting his knees out from under him. I'm sorely afraid that the Order of the Phoenix is about to be brought into the light.”

She matched his grin and moved his hand down to her waist.

“But you wouldn't have me any other way and you know it. I suppose you'll be paying our least favorite politician a surprise visit later on today, then. Forgive me if I don't accompany you. My hand still feels all gross from where that pig kissed it at the ball.”

“At least you didn't have to kiss his wife. I'd swear that her hand tasted like overcooked bacon. But now you can play the good little housewife and put our new place in order while I'm off slaving away at the Ministry. We could be just like a real married couple.”

“Don’t go pushing your luck, Potter. You might just find yourself sleeping on the sofa.”

The pair quickly reached the bottom of the stairs leading away from the Headmaster’s Office. Once outside in the corridor, they found several of their mutual friends waiting for them. News did indeed travel quickly at Hogwarts. Of course, Harry could hardly have expected that something such as a massacre in the dungeons would have been kept quiet. All of those assembled were anxious to hear the verdict and completely ignoring the two professors trying to send them back to their dormitories. Harry decided not to make them wait any longer.

“That old bastard has decided to chuck us both out, everybody. We’ll be leaving this dump for good at noon.”

That wasn’t entirely true, as Cho hadn’t actually been forcibly expelled. Her leaving the school was a voluntary decision. Several of the gathered vassals shook their heads and grumbled at the announcement. They probably didn’t know the whole story, but none seemed to believe that Malfoy’s death warranted any serious disciplinary action. Harry’s followers tended to subscribe to his own belief that Death Eaters and those who supported them were no better than animals. Tracey Davis spoke up with a sneer.

“You deserve a medal for getting rid of that prick Malfoy, and instead you get expelled. What a disgusting joke. I don’t think I really want to stay here any more either. I’d rather strike out with you two, if you don’t mind.”

Harry nodded his approval, and McGonagall lost her patience.

“Do not be ridiculous, Miss Davis. Return to your dormitory at once. Potter, I am most ashamed with your conduct. A fellow student is dead as a result of your actions, and yet you behave as though your punishment is wholly undeserved. I find myself appalled at the changes you have undergone since the end of last term. James and Lily would be thoroughly disgusted to see what their son has become.”

Harry lazily brandished the cursed blade in his right hand, letting his former Head of House know that her abrasive comments were not appreciated. He really didn't consider the school faculty to be worth bothering with anymore and wasn't going to waste his time trying to refute her claims. Minerva McGonagall had her head wedged too far up Dumbledore's wrinkled arse to be willing to go against his judgment. His deputy might disagree with his opinions, but she would never try to contradict his authority.

"Sticks and stones, Minnie dear. Make yourself useful and go console your beloved headmaster. He could really use a hug right about now, and I want to speak with my loyal friends in private."

The Transfiguration teacher bristled and reddened at her former student's condescending retort, but only turned and stormed up the stairs into Dumbledore's office without another word. Only Flitwick remained, watching Harry with a forlorn expression on his face. Cho seemed to still have enormous respect for her old Head of House, even if she had none for the headmaster or the rest of the faculty.

"I'm going to miss you, Professor Flitwick. Please don't judge us too harshly. Harry and I only acted out of self-defense. Draco Malfoy is dead because he tried to kill me from behind. Dumbledore cast Harry out of the school for protecting me. I would never even think of staying here under such circumstances. Hogwarts and her staff may have wronged us both today, but I will always value you as a mentor and a friend."

Cho took a knee and gave the tiny Charms master a hug while Harry dispelled his demonic weapon and cracked his neck.

"Ravenclaw House won't quite be the same without you, Miss Chang. You rank among the most beautiful and talented witches that I have ever had the privilege of teaching. You are strikingly similar to the late Lily Potter in so many ways that I sometimes think that you were destined to fall for her son. Regardless of what the headmaster mandates, you will always be welcome in Ravenclaw Tower so long as I am Head of House. Goodbye and take care. I wish you only the best of luck."

Flitwick sent Harry a nod and followed McGonagall into Dumbledore's office. The young warlord wasn't particularly insulted that the little dueling champion had left without speaking to him. They had after all never had any sort of relationship outside of the classroom. He put the matter out of his mind and instead turned to his friends.

"Okay, now that our beloved professors have afforded us a chance to speak, here's how things are going. As I've already told you, Cho and I are leaving Hogwarts, likely never to return. Anybody and everybody among our close knit group are welcome to come and join us in abandoning this place. I have recently inherited a large manor house belonging to the Black family, located at Grimmauld Place in London. Any and all of you are likewise invited to take up residence there. There's plenty of room."

Several of Harry's friends began talking to one another and nodding. He could tell by their differences in tone and body language that some would likely be remaining behind at Hogwarts. It was only natural that some of the more studious among his group would be more than reluctant to leave the school and abandon their educations, and he didn't feel inclined to pressure them into doing so. Hermione would be among that faction. Besides, he needed people to keep an eye on the school and look out for the other students. With Malfoy dead and Harry gone, he imagined that things would soon be going straight to Hell at Hogwarts. Su Li stepped forward apprehensively.

"I would like to go with you as well, if you will have me."

Harry smirked inwardly at that. Of course she would want to come. The poor girl was addicted to the arrangement she had with him and Cho. She was his unit's most skilled fighter and his favorite sparring partner, so he was pleased to have her coming. Having her best friend around would make the transition easier for his fiancée as well. Others joined in almost immediately.

"I guess I'm going too, then. My gran's probably not gonna like it, though."

"If Tracey's leaving, then so are we. This school's a total drag these days anyway. Slytherin's turning into nothing more than a spawning

pit for Death Eaters, and we'd rather just learn on our own like we have been at the vault."

"I'm sure the Weasleys won't stay here either, so there's pretty much the entire team gone. Nothing holding me here now, I reckon. If enough of us go, maybe we can hold pickup matches somewhere."

"My aunt was kissed by a Dementor in the battle at Azkaban last night. I'm not going to get my revenge by sitting around here doing nothing. She would have wanted me to do whatever I could to end this war before more innocents lost their lives. Please take me along as well."

"Merlin, Harry! You're stealin' all the girls away! I've got to go along also, then."

These were several of the comments that greeted Harry as people began moving over to where he and Cho were standing. By the end, those electing to leave the school with the pair were Su Li, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Katie Bell, Susan Bones, Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis and Michael Corner. The small party contained all of the more talented fighters among the vassals currently present, as well as the most devoutly loyal. Harry moved to address the remainder.

"It seems that some of you want to stay here. I expected as much. Be warned, I have a feeling that things are about to get heated around here. Slytherin's leader is now dead and there can be no doubt that the rest are going to be out for blood. Without me around to frighten them into silence they're likely to start some serious trouble. A part of me is going to enjoy watching Dumbledore squirm when his school falls into complete chaos. However, my enmity does not extend to the student body. Those of you electing to remain here are to protect the rest of the school and keep the junior Death Eaters at bay. Given your superior inborn skills and advanced combat training, this should not prove to be difficult. Be vigilant of the faculty as well. They will surely view you in a hostile light due to your association with me. If the old man and his cronies start to harass any of you, don't hesitate to let me know. My response will be swift and merciless."

The remaining students, a part of Ravenclaws joined by Parvati and Lavender, nodded and affirmed that they would. There was no lack of loyalty among those staying behind. Harry needed scholars every bit as much as he did soldiers. Brilliant minds were every bit as precious to an army as potent fighters. Not that he really counted either of the two remaining Gryffindors as such, at least in the conventional sense. Cho snapped him out of his musings with a gentle tap on the arm.

"We should probably get moving, Harry. We only have a few hours left before noon."

"Yes, you're probably right. Those of you who are leaving with us, return to your dormitories and prepare for departure. We'll assemble at the usual Portkey spot at the strike of noon. Take care of whatever business you might have here now, because we won't be coming back."

Everybody then disassembled and went their separate ways. Harry decided to secure his pets before packing his luggage. He first went up to the Owlery and send Hedwig on ahead to Grimmauld Place, after which he descended onto the grounds in search of his two tiger guardians. Under normal circumstances he would have simply summoned them to his side, but both had been badly injured in the battle down at Hogsmeade and he found himself unwilling to strain them by forcing them to travel. Surely somebody had discovered them after the fight, and Harry hoped that they had been remanded into Hagrid's custody for treatment. At any rate, he wanted to at least say goodbye to the gentle giant who had rescued him from his tortured life with the Dursleys. The morning highland air was thick and tense, as if nature itself were protesting the wanton destruction of the previous evening. Harry hardly bothered to notice as he ventured in the direction of Hagrid's hut. Sure enough, his two pets were bandaged and licking their wounds in the rear garden. Both snapped to attention upon noticing their master's presence and bounded over to where he stood waiting.

"My apologies for leaving you two behind. At least it looks like Hagrid's taken good care of you."

Stereo purrs from the two great cats let him know that his transgression was forgiven. Harry lazily scratched under Grindelwald's chin with his organic right hand. The door to the half-giant's hut boomed open and the groundskeeper stepped out. He seemed surprised to see Harry up and about.

"Yeh shouldn't be out of bed, Harry. Yeh took quite a drubbin' down there in Hogsmeade. 'Specially tha' left arm o' yers. Found yeh knocked out right in front o' the gates, I did. Hauled yeh up to the Hospital Wing meself. Been seein' these two 'round the Forbidden Forest all term. Didn' know they was yours, though. Fascinatin' creatures, they are, real smart."

Hagrid placed his crossbow next to the doorframe and stretched himself, inhaling a large mouthful of the dewy Scottish air. The rising sun gave barely illuminated the grounds. Smoke from the ruined village rose into the air, a constant reminder of Harry's failure. He didn't allow himself to dwell on it any longer, as sulking accomplished nothing.

"That they are, and it looks like you're rescued me again, Hagrid. Thank you for that, and also for taking care of these two. Don't worry about my health, though. Madam Pomfrey fixed me up and I've already survived another fight down in the dungeons this morning. A little walk isn't going to do me in now. I just came down to say goodbye."

"Down in the dungeons...them Slytherins are bad news, Harry. Yeh shoulda known better than ter go messin' abou' in their territory. But yeh look ter be alrigh' at least, tho' Ron and Hermione ain't with yeh. I've been wonderin' why yeh three hadn' been down ter visit me this term. And I don' get what yeh mean by sayin' goodbye. You'll be seein' me again in Care O' Magical Creatures this week."

Harry sighed and took a seat on one of the remaining overgrown pumpkins that hadn't been used in the previous evening's traditional school Halloween Feast. Harry had missed the meal due to the Ministry Ball. His two pets pattered over to him and sat down on either side of his makeshift chair.

“Perhaps you’re right. But I did take a walk down there with my girlfriend and we were assaulted. Draco Malfoy was killed in the resulting battle and I seriously wounded Professor Snape when he attacked me in retaliation. And I have been expelled from school as a consequence, Hagrid. Dumbledore is kicking me out because I defended myself when my life was threatened. I didn’t want you to have to hear the news from somebody else.”

Hagrid simply stared in disbelief for several seconds. Certainly the idea of Dumbledore’s normally most favored student being cast out of Hogwarts was incomprehensible to the large man. The school groundskeeper paced for a minute or so in front of his hut and turned back to Harry.

“That’s preposterous, Harry. Tha’ Malfoy boy was never anythin’ but bad news. Dark wizards, that entire family are. I reckon he deserved whatever he got. No way Dumbledore’d kick yeh out for takin’ care o’ him. And Snape’s been bullyin’ yeh fer years now. It just ain’t righ’. I’m going ter go an’ clear this up. He just can’t do this.”

Harry smiled inwardly. Rubeus Hagrid had suffered more than just about anybody else at the hands of the Malfoy family and their former corrupt Ministry connections. He had endured a wrongful stay in Azkaban and seen his hippogriff condemned due to Lucius and Draco. He would be the last person to have any sympathy for them, and seemingly brooked no kind feelings for an evil bastard like Snape either. Harry knew that Hagrid would never abandon his loyalty to Dumbledore, but it was still refreshing that the man took his side.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ve determined to leave anyway. The headmaster and I have come to strongly disagree on several fronts, and I’m making little difference for the war effort whilst sitting around in class. The people need to see their hero fighting against the darkness, and I personally want to see Tom Riddle put to his deserved death before more innocents come to harm. My days here have come to an end. I just needed to express my thanks for everything you’ve done for me before I depart. Take care, Hagrid.”

Hagrid nodded slowly, still seeming to be in a state of disbelief.

“An’ you too, Harry. You look out fer yerself, now.”

Harry returned the nod and left, whistling for his two pets to follow. He would have the sentence on Buckbeak rescinded and send the proud animal back to Hagrid. The man could use the company and Harry desired to use the master bedroom in which the hippogriff was held at Grimmauld Place for his own occupation. The lord of the manor wasn't about to sleep in a small guest bedroom. He made a quick stop by the Hospital Wing to pick up his previously forgotten armaments and then went to Gryffindor Tower to pack. Slytherin students of all years rushed out of his way whenever he passed. His own housemates bid him their final goodbye, inundated with the news of the previous evening's massacres and the battle in the dungeons. He had never really consorted with any of them and accepted their well wishes with indifference. Harry was oddly enough the last person to arrive at the usual assembly place, at just a few minutes past noon.

“There you are, finally. We were just discussing the possibility of leaving a little token of our esteem for the staff. Most of us find it a smashing idea, but Neville here seems to think it a bit rude. Perhaps you help us to decide.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and glanced at a pile of Hogwarts robes and textbooks sitting on the ground nearby. Apparently some of his friends had the idea to leave a nice bonfire for Dumbledore as they left. He typically wasn't one for pulling pranks, but it couldn't really hurt anything now. The young warlord reached into his trunk and withdrew his own robes and school tomes, adding them to the pile. Hufflepuff yellow mixed with Ravenclaw blue, and Gryffindor red and Slytherin green bled together as crests from the four Houses of Hogwarts were affixed to the robes on the ground. Harry smirked at the sight.

“Well, it seems to be a perfectly good idea to me. But first...”

Harry reached into his pack again and retrieved a quill and parchment, writing a few words down before passing the inscription to Cho. She looked at it for a moment and glanced questioningly at him.

“...Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London. I don't understand.”

“If you can read and understand that, then the old coot has removed the Fidelius Charm around our new home as so kindly requested. We’re all ready to go then. If everybody’s ready, then let’s leave a splendidly toasty home fire burning for Hoggy Warty Hogwarts and be on our way to destiny. Incendio.”

Harry used one of his preferred spells to spray a jet of boiling crude oil onto the pile of discarded robes and books before setting it ablaze. Flames roared nearly ten feet into the air. Neville hesitated for a second and then launched his own school things into the conflagration along with the others. He turned to Harry with a wan smile.

“Burning books...Merlin, Hermione’s going to be right furious when she hears of this.”

“She can scream herself hoarse at Lavender and Parvati, then. That’s what they get for not coming along with us.”

Harry stared at the raging inferno for a second, then down at his two pets circling around his legs. In the distance, similar fires blazed in Hogsmeade. Black smoke rose into the overcast afternoon sky from both zones. Kenzo’s house stood alone on its block, a beacon of life in an otherwise desolate place. Harry hadn’t had time to tell Hitomi of his leaving the school, but she would surely hear the news at Hogwarts. He would pay her a visit in the evening and explain everything in full detail. Realizing that he was spacing out, he turned his attention back to business. At his signal, everybody took their possessions and arranged in the proper formation to Portkey. Harry activated the device, and they were on the way to Number Twelve.

The party of ten simultaneously emerged in the dank but luxurious sitting room of Grimmauld Place. Harry’s two pets phased in immediately after, flanking the young warlord. The house was more active than usual, with various members of the Order of the Phoenix grumbling as they Apparated away and used the Floo. Harry snidely ignored several of the glares that were sent in his direction and addressed his followers.

“Here we are everybody. The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It’s rather disgusting now, but still a paradise compared to what it was two summers ago. Take your time and look around, make yourselves at home. Those of you who want to move in permanently, pick out an empty room anywhere on the second floor. My own quarters will be in the master bedroom on the fourth floor. If any of you would rather return to your own homes, which is also an acceptable option, please just let me know beforehand. I have some Weasleys to locate, so I’ll leave you all to your own devices.”

To Harry’s surprise, nearly everybody started for the second floor. He had at the very least expected the Slytherin girls to choose to return to their own ancestral homes. Two remained downstairs, one of whom snaked her arms around Harry’s waist from behind. Cho’s sultry whisper sounded in his ear.

“You said that your quarters were going to be on the fourth floor. I do rather hope that you meant to say *our* quarters.”

Harry closed his eyes and placed his hands over hers. The feel of her breasts pressing against his back filled him with desire.

“I dared not insinuate in front of the others. We must maintain a certain veneer of propriety, you know. But if you insist on knowing, I was indeed hoping that you might condescend to share my humble living space, as you will soon officially be the lady of the house.”

Cho slid around to stand in front of him and leaned up, brushing her warm lips against the underside of his chin.

“That’s good to hear. I’m going to put my things away now. Come and join me after you find your Weasleys. I really did expect your grand palace to be a little less dreary, Emperor Potter.”

“Do watch out for the hippogriff, Empress Cho. Remember to kneel properly.”

Harry smirked as his fiancée sashayed up the stairs. He caught a brief glimpse of her knickers underneath her black miniskirt as she turned the corner. It was rather cruel of her, tempting him with what

he couldn't have until their wedding night. Su followed her, flashing Harry a brief smile before she departed. Harry's newfound lack of any kind of set schedule meant that he would have so much more time to pursue his preferred activities. Young Miss Li might just be about to find her own agenda to be quite busy. He ventured into the kitchen, but found it empty. Perhaps the Weasleys were out. He decided to search the second floor, just in case. He instead found Kreacher passing by an enraged Neville Longbottom. Harry managed to overhear the demented House Elf's murmurings.

"Blood traitors in the House of Black. Kreacher's mistress would be in tears, she would. But Mistress Bellatrix served this one right. Parents made insane, made Kreacher's mistress very proud. If only Kreacher could serve a proper mistress, he..."

The filthy cretin said no more, as Harry strode across the hall and sent him flying into the far wall with a vicious kick. Kreacher attempted to stumble back to his feet, but the lord of the house reached his position and stomped hard on his hand, crushing the bones into splinters. He grasped the House Elf by the throat with his artificial arm, eyes glittering with disdain at his plight.

"I'm afraid you've committed your last act of disrespect, elf. I have no more use for you."

Kreacher grinned despite being strangled and rasped out a few words.

"Then Kreacher will be free, he will. Free to find a proper..."

Harry smiled coldly, paying little heed to the people streaming into the hallway to watch the spectacle. Killing Kreacher would be too merciful. This little abomination was largely culpable for Sirius's demise. Bellatrix had struck the killing blow, but this disloyal elf had helped to send him to that point. Harry had a perfect punishment in mind, one that would kill several birds with a single stone.

"But I've already found one for you, Kreacher. As Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, I order you to relocate to Number Four, Privet Drive, in the town of Little Whinging in Surrey. You will henceforth serve the Muggle couple living there. You are to use

magic whenever possible, and you are allowed to harm your new keepers only when your life is threatened. You are to tell them that you are a gift from their beloved nephew, a suitable replacement for their son. Know that you are still my slave, and thus the Dursley family cannot give you clothes. You are forbidden to leave the confines of their property under any circumstances.”

Harry was rather pleased with himself on this occasion. Kreacher would hate serving the Dursleys with all of his heart, and they would be likewise revolted by having him. Vernon and Petunia would be allowed to abuse him, but would be forced to keep him alive. He hoped that they would force him to live in Harry’s old cupboard.

“Kreacher will not serve filthy Muggles, he won’t! Master cannot...”

“Crucio.”

Harry kept Kreacher locked under the Unforgivable Curse for roughly a minute before releasing him with a yawn, enjoying the deranged creature’s tormented howling. The young warlord kicked him again as he writhed on the wooden floor.

“You will do as your master commands, elf. And as punishment for your disobedience...”

Harry wrenched the pathetic House Elf up by the arm with his organic hand and raked down his body with his claw, cutting only deep enough to shred his soiled clothing and scratch surface wounds into his body. Harry threw Kreacher into the wall again, sneering as the poor thing slid down slowly. Revenge was indeed a dish best served cold. Kreacher was still trying valiantly to remain conscious, but a newcomer traipsing down the stairs from the third floor noticed him and punted him back over to where Harry stood. He had fiery red hair and blue eyes burning with hatred and a hint of insanity. Ronald Bilius Weasley had really and truly snapped with the death of his father.

“Disgusting little shit. That’s for calling Hermione a Mudblood. Lost your clothes, I see.”

Harry chuckled, causing his friend to glance over in his direction.

“Off to your new assignment, Kreacher. Nothing but immeasurable pain awaits you if you delay further.”

Kreacher's eyes were wide with hatred, but the naked and beaten House Elf disappeared with a crack as ordered.

“Remind me never to piss you off, Harry. Merlin...I almost felt sorry for the thing.”

Harry turned to where Blaise was reclining against the door to the bedroom that she would share with Daphne and Tracey. She was dressed much more conservatively than usual in a black dress of mourning, and sadness reflected in her pretty green eyes. Grieving for her aunt, Harry realized, though she tried to put on a strong front. His respect for the former Slytherin increased quite a bit. He smiled as he met her gaze.

“Never piss me off, Blaise. That was a matter of vengeance. That disgusting little traitor helped to kill the former master of this house, Sirius Black. My godfather, as you'll recall from the will reading. He had to be punished accordingly, and being forced to serve my Muggle relatives is the bitterest fate that I could conceive for him.”

Susan Bones wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“A rude and disloyal House Elf. He deserved what he got and much worse.”

Harry blasted away some cobwebs from a nearby corner with his wand. Grimmauld Place was just a filthy old house, and Mrs. Weasley's best efforts had made it only presentable at best. The rest seemed to agree with Susan and the crowd quickly dispersed, leaving Harry and Ron standing alone in the silent hallway. The redhead had dark circles under his eyes, adding to his generally menacing look. Harry looked him over for a lone moment and noticed really for the first time how much of an impact his strenuous training at the vault and in his more physically demanding classes at school had made upon him. He had the body of a veteran warrior, with large bulky muscles that were a sharp contrast to Harry's own lean athletic

physique. He wasn't saying much of anything, leaving Harry to break the ice.

"You're scaring me, Ron. Let's go sit down somewhere and talk."

Ron shook his head for a moment and seemed to snap out of his trance.

"Sorry about that, mate. I've just got a lot on my mind right now. We can use my room."

Harry followed Ron into the room that they had shared during the summer before fifth year. His school trunk was already there. Harry figured that the Weasleys had already intended to take some time away from school while dealing with their father's funeral arrangements and keeping their mother company. The room was a complete mess, even more so than usual with Ron. He pushed some clothing aside and took a seat on the bed while Harry shoved some textbooks off of a chair.

"I heard the news this morning after Bill took off from the Hospital Wing like a man possessed. I'm truly sorry about your father."

Ron waved his condolences away and started tossing his wand from one hand to another.

"Isn't your fault, Harry. But thanks anyway. I'm a bit surprised to see you up and moving so quickly. You were in a right state when Hagrid found you after that fight in Hogsmeade. Bloody stupid of you, by the way, taking on You-Know-Who without any backup. Your girlfriend was in hysterics."

Harry rolled his eyes and scratched the back of his neck with his good arm.

"I know...I've gotten the lecture already. And she's my fiancée, actually. We made the engagement official at the ball last night. I'm surprised it's not all over the papers."

Ron scowled and a note of bitterness entered his voice. Harry immediately regretted his last sentence and particularly the implication that his engagement was more important news than the battles in which so many had died, including Ron's father. He hadn't meant for it to come out that way. He would let Ron vent and try to change the subject.

"I rather think the Prophet has bigger news to put on the headlines today, mate. Azkaban and Hogsmeade both lost in a single night. Still, congratulations on all that. Cho's a really great girl, even if she does support the bloody Tornadoes. She'll make you a good wife. Blimey, though. Sixth year at Hogwarts and you're engaged. Gin and 'Mione are gonna toss the mother of fits when they find out and you didn't tell them, to say nothing of mum. She's always been hoping you'd end up with Ginny."

Harry grinned dryly and put his feet up on Ron's trunk.

"I'm sure I'll survive somehow. I haven't Hermione and Ginny, or the twins."

"Gin's upstairs. She's been crying ever since the news came down. 'Mione and Charlie are trying to comfort her. I was up there too 'till I heard the racket back in the hallway. Bill's out seeing a coroner with mum and the twins are off getting knackered somewhere in Diagon Alley. I expect they'll turn up around supper."

Harry remained silent for a moment, thinking of something else to say. He also made a mental note of the fact that Charlie was currently residing in the house. He would have to find an opportunity to corner the dragon handler and talk candidly with him, or at least to have Bill do so. The man's rather unique skills could prove most useful.

"I heard you sent Seamus and Dean to the Hospital Wing this morning."

Ron nodded with a snort, tossing his wand onto the bedside table.

"Bloody prats, trying to tell me to calm down. My dad was murdered by Death Eaters, for Merlin's sake. I'm just so angry, mate. I've never

felt like this before. I mean, I've been mad and all, but this is different. I feel like I'm on fire and my head's pounding. I feel like murdering somebody, Harry. I want to kill the bastards that did this to my father."

"I can't fault you that. As it happens, the old coot's just kicked me out of Hogwarts on such a charge. That's why so many of us are here. They all chose to leave the school along with me in protest of my most unfair expulsion. I acted only in self-defense."

Ron's anger seemed to subside for a moment as he took a genuine interest in Harry's story.

"So that's why so many of the others were out in the hall. Bloody Hell...kicked right out of Hogwarts. Didn't honestly think Dumbledore had it in him. Now this I've got to hear. Let's have it, and no leaving out details."

Harry shrugged and flexed the fingers of his claw arm. The ruby shone in the sunlight coming in through the closed window. Ron stared transfixed at Kreacher's blood as it fell from the tips of his best friend's artificial fingers in small droplets.

"It's rather simple. I took a walk down into the dungeons and ended up in a fight. Malfoy pushed things a little too far and I skewered him with this new arm of mine like a piece of meat. Snape took exception and I cut his arm off with this..."

He then caused his infernal energy sword to materialize in his right hand; dispelling it again once Ron had gained a good enough look at it.

"...The ultimate weapon, a sword forged of pure magical essence. It once belonged to my ancestor. Snape will never brew a potion again. And when this war is over I will have him executed for high treason along with everybody else bearing the mark. Perhaps I ought to apologize. I know that you would have wanted to take part in Malfoy's death. I quite simply lost control of myself."

Ron crossed his arms and looked away.

“Damn right I would have. Bloody ferret, I hope you made him suffer at least.”

Harry laughed loudly and moved with his feet with feral grace. He stood Ron up and put a hand on the violent boy’s shoulder, staring straight into his fiery blue eyes with forest green crystals that danced with amused malevolence. He spoke in a crooning tone that was able to both soothe and embolden his oldest schoolmate.

“But of course. Don’t be bitter, though. There’s plenty more killing left to be done before the end. You’ll be my favored enforcer from now on. Any Death Eaters that we might capture, you will be allowed to punish at your discretion. You can bring the axe down upon Snape’s greasy head with your own two hands and command a special task force designed to round up and purge any remaining scumbags once I’ve dealt with Voldemort. Slaughter their sons and relatives and take their snotty women as your slaves if you see fit. Anything that it takes to slake that terrible anger you feel.”

“That’s a mighty generous offer, mate. I think...”

Any further conversation was interrupted by Hermione Granger bursting into the room.

“I just ran into Cho upstairs and heard the news. Harry, I can’t believe you’ve gotten yourself expelled from Hogwarts! And you killed somebody for no good reason at all! I just don’t understand what you’re thinking anymore...”

Ron snorted and turned to the window while Harry gave Hermione an annoyed look. It was no surprise that she couldn’t understand him. Here Ron’s father was dead and she was worried about school. Despite her intelligence, Hermione could be stupidly closed minded at times. Cho comprehended the state of things far better. A Hogwarts degree was totally irrelevant given what was looming on the horizon.

“I only gutted Malfoy, and his very existence is cause for extermination. And I don’t give a tit about Hogwarts anymore, Hermione. I only returned in the first place because it was what

everybody else expected of me and I didn't feel inclined to rock the boat any more than I had to. Things have changed now."

Hermione sniffed and looked at Harry as if he were insane. The latter didn't back down an inch.

"Things have not changed that much, Harry! You still need an education!"

"I cannot and will not attend a school where the headmaster abandons me for defending my fiancée's life. As for needing an education, a ruler has no use for some ridiculous academic degree. Being accredited in my bloody Charms studies has no bearing upon my abilities in governing an empire or commanding an army. And that's just the future. Right now I have a war to help prosecute and a Dark Lord to banish. Forgive me for not devoting my energies to listening to bloody Hagrid lecture about crups and kneazels."

Ron smirked from where he was standing as Hermione flushed crimson. Harry was more than a bit surprised that the redhead was visibly siding with him over his girlfriend. At least, he assumed they were involved. He has escorted her to the Ministry Ball the previous evening.

"I thought this was all about righting the wrongs in our society. You never said anything about making yourself a king. And you never told me that you were engaged!"

"You need to calm down. First, I just made the matter official with the Changs last night. I had no time to talk to you afterwards. Second, you knew from the start that I was going to take down the Ministry. Surely you didn't think that I was going to institute rule by the Wizengamot or hand the reigns of power over to another. I'm fighting for this, and I'll be damned all the way back to Privet Drive before I'll allow some other fool to ruin it. I will burden myself with the role of enlightened despot. Of course, I'll have brilliant minds such as yours to help guide me in the right direction."

Hermione still looked a bit tiffed, but Harry could tell that the rather meaningless compliment regarding her intelligence went a long way

towards snuffing out her bad temper. The girl was really a glutton for praise. Harry hoped that he'd be able to get away soon. He needed to get to the Ministry and worm his way into a stronger alliance with Fudge. His previous strategy of pretending to be friendly to both the Minister and the old man and playing them against one another from the sidelines was no longer valid. He needed to entrench himself firmly with the corrupt politico in order to maintain his own position. He could always get rid of the man later.

"Don't think you can lead me off with flattery, Harry James Potter. Your voice is off, by the way. And I don't know what you've done to your left hand, but it's dripping blood all over Ron's floor. Come to think, I saw blood outside too, and something that looked like the remains of poor Kreacher's...oh, please tell me you didn't..."

Harry had his theories as to the nature of his changed voice inflections, and was somewhat surprised that neither Ron nor Cho had brought it up. Certainly the latter would at some point. Nor did he want to listen to Hermione rant about the illegality of his new appendage or the fact that he deserved the injury for attacking the Death Eaters solo at Hogsmeade. He waved a hand dismissively and replied.

"I only sent that disloyal elf to serve a new master. He isn't dead, though I will admit to roughing him up a bit on the way out the door. Now then, I have a serious request for you. Voldemort exhibited a new form last night, and I have it a good idea as to what it was. I need you to do as much research as you can about Liches when you get back to Hogwarts. I need to know exactly what we're up against."

Hermione's eyes widened almost comically. It didn't surprise Harry that she'd read something on the subject already.

"A Lich...Harry, this is bad. I haven't read enough about them to have any true idea, but...I should get back to school and get to work now. I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Ron, I'll see you once you get back to Hogwarts."

"Don't wait up, 'Mione. I'm not going back. I already decided I don't want to be there without Harry. You tell that old bastard that he'll soon

regret the day he turned his back on my best mate. He did the right thing in defending Cho. And my dad's dead now because of his being in the bloody Order. Let Dumbledore know that if Harry doesn't come for him, then I damn sure will."

She looked dejected at the news that Ron wouldn't be going back to school, but nodded and headed towards the door. Harry just quirked an eyebrow at Ron's words, being totally unsurprised that Hermione would not be joining them in exile. Dumbledore would effortlessly destroy the redhead in a second, but it was still a striking statement of loyalty.

"I'll pass the word along. I should be going now. I'll miss you, Ron. And you too, Harry."

Both nodded back in reply. Hermione left and headed for her own room to gather her things. Harry saw a tear rolling down her cheek as she left. However, he had neither the time nor the inclination to comfort her. Her relationship with Ron was for them to worry about. He had a bumbling Minister to deceive and a chess game to set up, as well as a vigilante group to expose. Albus Dumbledore was going to very soon rue the day that he flouted the Heir of Grindelwald. He turned to the brooding redhead that would become his most loyal battle captain.

"I've got to leave also. I need to get over to the Ministry and set some things up with Fudge. That idiot's going to lead me right into power and never have a clue. When your mum and Bill come back, ask him to get some goblin warders over here this evening. I want protective measures on this house pronto. I'm going to be counting on you a lot more from now on, you know."

"Right, mate. See you later."

"Get some rest, Ron. You really do look like death warmed over."

Ron only grunted his affirmation. Harry knew that he was sulking over what was likely the death knell of his relationship with the lovely but equally exasperating Miss Granger. It was for the best, he thought. She would never understand Ron's obsession with vengeance, and

perhaps he would find somebody with whom he'd be more compatible. As he left, Harry vaguely recalled that it was in this very room that he had talked a drunken Ron Weasley into supporting him in the first place. And now he had convinced his friend to become his personal attack dog. He chuckled to himself as he started upstairs to shower and dress up for his little charade as a loyal subject to the Ministry of Magic. He would draw his little flute and dance Cornelius Fudge ultimately into his grave, and then his own empire would be born. Zharrghast laughed alongside him from deep within his mind.

(End Chapter Twenty-Six)

Author's Note: Well now, this is certainly late. A demanding course schedule and a bout of the stomach flu have kept me rather indisposed. Expect slow updates over the next few months. This term is just a total ball buster. Next chapter is going to be a big one, as Harry is now actually putting his plans for a takeover into motion, and the Cho/Hitomi showdown will also occur. For those of you worried that Harry is going to turn into another Voldemort, he won't. He's ruthless and willing to do almost anything in order to achieve his ends, but he's not an insane megalomaniac like Riddle. The Narcissa Malfoy arc will also be terminated shortly. Her prediction came true. Her son crossed Harry and paid with his life. Now it remains to be seen what a bereaved mother will do when her son's murderer is also her lover. Another major battle is also looming on the horizon. Stay tuned folks, and please review. A high number will certainly make me try harder to free time in my busy schedule to write.

“I’ve got to leave also. I need to get over to the Ministry and set some things up with Fudge. That idiot’s going to lead me right into power and never have a clue. When your mum and Bill come back, ask him to get some goblin warders over here this evening. I want protective measures on this house pronto. I’m going to be counting on you a lot more from now on, you know.”

“Right, mate. See you later.”

“Get some rest, Ron. You really do look like death warmed over.”

Ron only grunted his affirmation. Harry knew that he was sulking over what was likely the death knell of his relationship with the lovely but equally exasperating Miss Granger. It was for the best, he thought. She would never understand Ron’s obsession with vengeance, and perhaps he would find somebody with whom he’d be more compatible. As he left, Harry vaguely recalled that it was in this very room that he had talked a drunken Ron Weasley into supporting him in the first place. And now he had convinced his friend to become his personal attack dog. He chuckled to himself as he started upstairs to shower and dress up for his little charade as a loyal subject to the Ministry of Magic. He would draw his little flute and dance Cornelius Fudge ultimately into his grave, and then his own empire would be born. Zharrghast laughed alongside him from deep within his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Feminine Conspiracy – Left Hook, Right Cross

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

The Ministry building was in complete chaos, as Harry observed upon using his Portkey to appear directly beyond the main atrium. He had no desire to submit his wand to a perfunctory check at the entrance due to the multitudes of dark curses that would invariably register. Wizards and witches scurried about like ants panicking over the chaos caused by the combined losses of Azkaban and Hogsmeade overnight. Some Aurors attempted to keep order but their efforts proved mostly futile. None of the known bigwigs were present, and were all likely cowering alongside Fudge up in the Minister’s office.

Harry glanced back at the Fountain of Magical Brethren that stood at the center of the entrance hall. Less than half a year ago, Dumbledore and Voldemort had dueled on that spot. Harry had attempted his first Unforgivable mere yards away. The marble statues that had been animated and destroyed in the fighting last term had been replaced. Harry had no substantial idea as to where he might find Fudge's office and decided to give himself a short tour of the government building as he searched, stepping into an unoccupied lift as owls soared overhead. As the elevator slowly ground into action, Harry decided to seek the answer to a question that had been plaguing his mind.

"Zharrghast. I require a word with you."

The fallen god remained silent for a long moment, as if impressing upon Harry that he was not at the young warlord's beck and call. Harry was annoyed with his unwanted symbiote's smug superiority but could do little about it.

"Ask and you shall receive, mortal, for I am listening."

"My vocal patterns are changing, as are yours. I come searching for an explanation."

Zharrghast chuckled within Harry's mind, amused with his feigned ignorance.

"But you know the answer even now, my fallen angel. Your voice becomes mine even as mine becomes yours. We are becoming one. You have become ever more vicious in recent weeks, thirsting for the slaughter of battle and obliterating all that stands in your path regardless of any semblance of mercy or compassion. Your powers have augmented themselves exponentially and continue to grow now. As time and our fusion progress you shall likewise gain access to yet more of my strength and resolve."

Harry accepted the truth with a nonverbal sigh. He was becoming stronger. He fought against the Dark Lord and survived when he was having nearly equal difficulty against Bellatrix two months prior and had ultimately forced Riddle to flee, albeit with a huge assist from the

old man. A victory that the fallen god had promised prior to the fight. Despite the grievous wounds incurred during that battle he had been physically and magically able to fight again mere hours later in the dungeons. For some reason, he didn't particularly mind the fact that Zharrghast was able to openly influence his actions. The path that the fallen god's passive suggestions had cajoled Harry into taking was ultimately to his benefit. He was now free from Dumbledore and Hogwarts, and thus able to devote himself entirely to his own machinations.

Or to theirs, as now seemed to be the case. The obvious fact that at Zharrghast was quietly manipulating him more than the old coot ever had preyed at the back of Harry's subconscious. Still he seemed unable to shake the being from his soul and was thus capable only of walking upon the road to which his own feet brought him. And besides, he required his symbiote's power in order to defeat Voldemort. Zharrghast represented the power that the Dark Lord knew not, of that Harry was now certain. Chaotic energy had not been the answer, and surely it couldn't be something as hokey and clichéd as the "power of love" or some similar load of tripe.

"I understand now. I can't get rid of you, but you'd better give me more power as rent."

"Accepting the inevitable shall bring about the end so much sooner. You do well not to resist the power that I can grant you. Continue to fight at your utmost and our enemies shall fall at our feet pleading for mercy that shall not come."

Harry sneered broadly as his lift came to a halt at the Level Six of the Ministry of Magic.

"Sounds good to me. I'll take my leave of you now. I've reached my stop."

Zharrghast left the forefront of Harry's mind with a snort. He young warlord stepped out into the hallway, his burgundy formal robes splaying majestically about him. Su had sweetly wrapped his artificial arm in black satin after his shower, effectively concealing the gruesome appendage from plain sight. He wore his right bracer as

well as his leg guards and had an ornate ritual dagger that he had found in the master bedroom back at Grimmauld Place girded at his right wrist. Harry noticed several Ministry workers glancing at him with slight smiles as they went about their work. He then decided that he might also take steps to procure the loyalties of the rank and file bureaucracy while playing his manipulation with the Minister. His eventual transition into power would prove much smoother were he to grease the wheels of the political machine beforehand. After all, a throne built upon a shaky foundation was doomed to collapse. As he rounded a corner the lead to the Department of Magical Sports and Games, he collided with a witch carrying an armful of papers. They fell haphazardly to the floor as the girl stifled a curse. Harry smiled apologetically.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry. Here, let me give you a hand with those."

Harry fluidly dropped to a knee and began gathering up the files. He stole a long glance at the girl in the meantime. She was very pretty, though not exactly in a glamorous way, with wavy black hair that hung just below her shoulders and sharp, shining deep blue eyes. Her work robes clung to her figure, highlighting her generous bust and curvy hips. She carried herself with a sort of graceful, chaste Victorian bearing that attracted him just as much as her features. He had seen her at the Ministry Ball the previous night. She was Percy's girlfriend, the former Ravenclaw. The witch smiled wanly as Harry scooped up the last few papers of her load.

"Not your fault. I should have watched where I was going."

"You're Percy's girlfriend. I seem to recall you asking to glimpse my broomstick once."

She smiled and cast her eyes downward with a gentle blush. If Harry hadn't known better, he would have sworn that they went directly to his crotch.

"It's true that I have always been a bit of a Quidditch buff, but I rather doubt that your broomstick's keeper would appreciate my taking a look now. The two of you looked great together at yesterday

evening's formal. I'm Penelope Clearwater, by the way. Or Percy Weasley's girlfriend, as you seem to know me."

Penelope, that was her name. Harry briefly wondered how he could have forgotten. Regardless, it wasn't as if he had actually spoken with her at length. She obviously knew Cho given how casually she had dropped a reference to the Chinese girl. That fact made it all the more entertaining to tease her, though his real motive was to enrage Percy. He unleashed his dakaathi thrall just enough to enrapture her before continuing. Miss Clearwater's pretty blue eyes misting over and her breathing deepening indicated that it had worked. He took her hand and rubbed circles on the back with his thumb.

"Well met, Miss Clearwater. Now that we've been properly introduced, perhaps I might prevail upon you to escort me to the Minister's Office. I have some important business to attend to this afternoon."

Penelope nodded and did a slight curtsy, still keeping Harry's hand.

"No problem at all. Madam Marchbanks can wait a minute or two for these, especially for your sake. Minister Fudge's office is on Level Eleven. The stairs leading up are just past the Wizengamot's assembly hall in old Courtroom Nine. Follow me."

Harry followed Clearwater into the nearest available lift. The only other occupant was a middle-aged wizard who he didn't recognize, but who still bowed to him as though he were some sort of deity. Harry smirked to himself. He really could get used to this sort of treatment. The man got off at Level Seven, while Harry and his companion continued as far as the lift would take them to Level Nine. The entire Ministry was in chaos, but the Auror Department was in a state of absolute pandemonium. Owls were landing and soaring away in and around just about every cubicle and every wizard or witch that Harry could see sported injuries of some form or another. He and Penelope passed the entire department without even being noticed as he shook his head at the lack of security. He wrinkled his nose in disgust upon seeing Courtroom Nine and its large iron doors.

"Now that brings back some unpleasant memories..."

He felt Penelope's warm hand moving up to his shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Many employees around here were disgusted with that smear campaign the Minister and Madam Umbridge ran against you last year. Only that we were afraid to speak out against them for fear of losing our jobs and getting blacklisted, or worse, being hauled before the Wizengamot and sentenced to Azkaban on some trumped up charge of sedition."

Harry felt such cowardice to be at the heart of the wizarding world's problems. He could hardly have expected complete strangers to risk their own careers and very freedom for his sake, though. He certainly would not have done so for any of them.

"That's understandable. I wasn't aware that there was so much discontent around here."

"The Minister can fool the public with his new laws and through finally giving you the respect you deserve, but around here we're exposed to him every day to the point that most employees can see through him. It's all propaganda, nothing more. The bigwigs are talking a new line, but the underlying motivations are forever the same. All they're interested in doing is remaining in power, and now they're using your name and the war to do so. Maybe not everybody sees it, but I do."

"You're obviously a very clever woman, Penelope, a real credit to Ravenclaw House."

"Thank you. It's nice to be noticed on occasion, and here we are."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He wasn't surprised that his temporary companion received little attention or respect in her personal life. Percy's head was terminally wedged so deep into Fudge's bloated arse that the redhead could hardly notice the beautiful and intelligent creature that was wasting the best years of her life for his sake. Harry found it wholly disgusting. The only relationship that Percy cared for was his professional sycophancy regarding his boss. He couldn't even be bothered to comfort his bereaved mother in the wake of his father's death, so much less for

Penelope. Harry took a glance at Fudge's secretary. The woman was very much what Lavender Brown might have become in a decade's time, blonde and visibly airheaded and painted like an expensive slum whore with gobs of overpriced and gaudy makeup. She was shamelessly dressed in clothing that quite happily showcased her enormous breasts and toned legs.

"Excuse me, miss, but I would like to meet with the Minister as soon as possible. Please inform him that Harry Potter is here."

The woman attempted to smile apologetically, but ended up looking like a gushing fool.

"Wow, the real Harry Potter. I'm Alanna, Minister Fudge's personal secretary. He's taking a late lunch today. This morning has been so hectic, you know. If you'd like, I'll let him know that you're waiting. Perhaps he'll be willing to meet with you early."

Harry shook his head in the negative.

"That won't be necessary. I'd rather not disturb the Minister's repose. I'm certain he's had a most trying day given yesterday evening's events. I'll just wander around for awhile and return when he's ready to receive me."

"His lunch hour will be up in about thirty minutes or so. Maybe I could give you a small personal executive wing tour in the meantime."

Harry was easily astute enough to garner the innuendo behind the woman's offer. Even had he not, the hint given off when she folded her arms and squeezed her breasts together was impossible to miss. Harry wasn't particularly aroused by the display.

"Perhaps some other time. Penelope, I think I'll burden you a bit longer. You can show me your workplace."

"That would be wonderful, Harry Potter."

Harry headed back towards the lifts with Penelope, waiting until they were a distance away before commenting.

"I somehow doubt Fudge hired that girl for her organizational skills."

"She's no less qualified than her predecessor was, and even I have to admit that she's easier on the eyes than Madam Umbridge."

Harry threw his head back and laughed softly, causing his long hair to swish gently.

"We really should have met sooner. Now, let's hear all about your job. I recall you mentioning Griselda Marchbanks earlier."

They had come to a stop in the corridor just outside Courtroom Nine. Harry still carried her work papers from earlier bundled in his right arm.

"It's nothing special really. I mostly do clerical work with the Wizarding Examinations Authority. I processed your OWL scores, as a matter of fact. The examiners went on about your corporeal Patronus for almost a week solid following the exams. Anyhow, I'm hoping to start my graduate studies next fall. I want to get my degree in Ancient Runes and become a qualified test examiner. I had considered teaching at first, but..."

Whatever she was going to say was cut off by a nasally voice coming from the general direction of the lifts. Harry cracked his knuckles, premeditating his next move. Percy Weasley strode towards the pair, puffed up in his delusional self-importance as always.

"Penelope, there you are. I've been looking all over for...Potter."

Harry affixed his nastiest sneer onto his face.

"Weatherby. Here I was having a nice visit. Trust you to spoil it with your presence."

Percy sniffed and pushed his horn rimmed glasses down his nose.

"I demand to know what you are doing here and why you are accosting my girlfriend."

Harry chuckled, staring directly at Percy as he leaned over and kissed the obviously uncomfortable Penelope Clearwater on the corner of the mouth.

"I accost nobody, Percy. I'm merely giving her the attention that you seem unwilling to. Or perhaps you're simply incapable. That would be quite the interesting scenario, for your parents to have seven children and somehow produce an impotent for a son."

Percy glared, but dared not attack the terrible warrior prince that stood before him. Like the sniveling coward that he was, he instead turned the blame onto the weaker target, raising his hand at Penelope although she had somehow solicited Harry's actions. He had barely done so when the young warlord's artificial arm struck out. Harry slapped Percy in the face with all the force granted by his ruby appendage. The silken wrapping provided no cushioning. The redhead's jaw cracked and his teeth loosened as he fell backward to his hands and knees, visibly disoriented and with blood streaming from his mouth.

"That was from your brothers and sister, you worthless brown-noising cretin..."

Harry could have left him there, but it simply wasn't in his nature to leave something only partially done. He moved forward with feral grace, following up on the arrogant Ministry bureaucrat with a soccer ball kick to the ribcage and a savate kick to the head. Percy was left barely conscious on the ground from the assault.

"...Those were for your mum and dad, Weatherby. And this is simply because I despise you."

Harry reached down and grabbed the prostrate young man by the ankle. He slung Percy's body headfirst into a wooden cabinet filled with ink and parchment for the Wizengamot's use. The shelves and all of their contents spilled onto the redhead, covering him in black ink nearly from head to toe. The noise brought Aurors streaming into the hallway from their nearby department. Tonks was among them, and the young Metamorphmagus stared at Harry for a moment, visibly unsure as to what he was doing there. Nobody moved to help Percy,

leading Harry to the conclusion that they hated the pompous little shite as much as he did. Percy was meanwhile attempting to get back onto his knees. Penelope walked over and kneeled next to him, but slapped him hard in his already bruised face.

“Percival Ignatius Weasley, you and I are through!”

Percy only fell unconscious in response. Penelope walked back over to Harry and kissed him full on the mouth. It was a chaste little peck but Harry desired nothing more from the girl. Seeing that annoying git humiliated further was reward enough.

“I should be going back upstairs now. The Minister should be about ready for me.”

“Thank you for lending me the courage to finally do that. I’ve been unhappy with him for years. Do me a small favor and give my regards to Cho. We’ve sadly fallen out of touch since my Hogwarts days and I’d love to have lunch and catch up with her sometime.”

“Will do, Miss Penelope Clearwater. I’ll see you around again sometime, I hope.”

Harry turned to leave without any further comment. He had originally just been planning to amuse himself with Clearwater a bit and perhaps make Percy jealous. Instead he had been able to give the pompous redhead the savage beating that he had been earning for nearly three years and completely destroy his pride and his relationship at the same time. Harry would be a pleased young man indeed should his meeting with Fudge go even half as well. He took especial care to step onto the prone stooge as he departed.

Meanwhile, a confrontation of a different sort was set to take place far to the north as Cho Chang materialized in the center of the ruined Hogsmeade square with a loud crack. She had learned to Apparate over the summer but had not yet bothered to get her official license. The Chinese beauty had little use for the skill at home as Liangshan Alley was blanketed with various Anti-Apparition wards. This was both to keep strangers away from their insular community and to ensure that the sanctity of any given resident’s home would be protected at all times from uninvited visitors. She had found reason to

travel today, however. She was determined to discover was exactly her betrothed's relationship was with a certain Japanese spy. She had seen the looks that the pair was prone to exchanging on occasion and had noticed Harry staring at this lone standing building as they departed from Hogwarts.

It was a cozy little place, much more inviting than her family's large compound. The interior décor was very Japanese. Her father would have hated it. Despite being far more progressive in his views than most Chinese wizards, the man still held some old-world racist views regarding certain peoples. She found it to be ridiculous. The lower floor interior shop was still in shambles from the previous evening's Death Eater attack. Blood stained the white matting in the room's center where somebody had obviously fallen during the fighting. So many ornate robes were ruined. Harry would be so distraught. A soft feminine voice rang out from upstairs as she took a moment to examine the large red tengu mask that hung from the wall behind the register.

"Please come on upstairs. There's nothing worth seeing down there."

Cho's dark eyes widened just a bit, though nobody was there to see it. She hadn't been making any noise. At least she now had an invitation to go about her business here and wouldn't be intruding upon her assumed rival's domicile. Some might find it odd that she would be concerned with showing proper respect towards a woman who was potentially sleeping with her fiancée, but propriety was an essential part of her upbringing. She had forgotten those lessons in her dealings with Harry immediately following Cedric's demise and had quite nearly lost him before even really finding him as a result. That had been a most sobering experience, and she had sworn not to ever let her emotions override her better judgment again, though she had already once broken that vow in regards to one Amos Diggory. At least it had all made Harry the least bit hesitant to rouse her temper.

The upstairs living area was somewhat sparsely furnished, but retained that same homelike atmosphere that she had felt outside the building. Cho opted to forego any further exploration and instead followed the scent of freshly brewed tea into the apartment's small dining area. The older girl was predictably there, looking over a scroll

as she sat at the small table. She was dressed in a simple black robe that loosely clung to her figure, a stark contrast to the skin tight ninjutsu bodysuits that Cho had previously glimpsed the Japanese woman wearing on the few occasions the latter visited the grounds away from teaching. She turned and regarded the Chinese girl with an even gaze.

“I was wondering when I might expect a visit from you. Since you’re here, do sit down and have some tea with me. Grandpa’s out visiting some friends for the day and I could use the company.”

Cho took a seat opposite the other woman, eyeing her distrustfully as she accepted a cuppa. Upon taking a dainty sip she admitted inwardly that the tea was most delicious. It contained a distinct sweet raspberry flavor and had been brewed to perfection, putting even the fanciest tea houses to shame. She decided to make small talk and size up her opponent before getting to the real reason behind her impromptu visit.

“If you don’t mind, tell me how you were able to detect me downstairs so easily.”

“I felt your aura when you Apparated into town. All the villagers are dead now, so you weren’t exactly difficult to single out, and your signature is rather easy to recognize regardless because you have Harry’s magic concentrated inside you. It’s most likely a spillover from that bizarre knighthood ceremony he put you through.”

Cho raised an eyebrow, less than pleased with how quickly Harry’s name had come up.

“You must know Harry pretty well, to be able to notice his signature on sight.”

“He spent a month living in our home over the summer, more than enough time for me to memorize his aura pattern. He also has something within his magic that other wizards don’t. But that can’t be what you came all the way here to discuss with me.”

“True, but it does in fact concern Harry. I hope you’ll forgive my forwardness, but I need to know exactly what your relationship with him amounts to.”

Cho bristled inwardly as the other girl raised a delicate eyebrow and laughed softly while refilling her teacup.

“My, that is being rather forward. Here I was hoping for at least a couple veiled preliminary bouts. The art of subtlety is apparently lost on you. Still, an honest question merits an honest answer. He and I have been carrying on a relationship for some time.”

She had not truly been prepared to hear that, despite having her suspicions upon coming. Harry had been seeing another woman behind her back from the very beginning. All that rot he had told her about loving her had been nothing but a lie in the end. Perhaps this was his ultimate revenge for her dating Cedric those years ago. She felt ashamed and humiliated at having been used by somebody she trusted so implicitly. But more than anything else, she was shaking with anger, directed towards both that unfaithful feathered lout she called a boyfriend and his little Okinawa fuck toy.

“That bastard...that utter bastard. And you...you had to have known what he was doing.”

The Japanese girl was now looking at her with a serious expression.

“It’s not entirely what you think it is. Harry really does love you very much.”

“Don’t even talk to me about him. I’m sure you both found all this quite hilarious.”

“That’s completely false. He never told you about me because he knew you would react in this manner and probably leave him on the spot, and that would have torn him apart. He loves us both completely. And you’ve wronged him as well.”

Cho’s eyebrows shot up at that last remark. She credited herself for not having stormed away in a fit already. She was both confused and

indignant by this hussy claiming that Harry loved the Chinese girl despite his carrying on with other women, but would at least listen to everything before deciding whether to castrate him or just break off their engagement. She poured herself another cuppa and downed it with shaking hands. Her eyes flashed with obsidian lightning as she met her rival's gaze and responded sarcastically.

"No, I'm pretty sure that I've never been anything but completely faithful to him."

"I take it he's also never told you the full truth about his demonic origins, then..."

Cho forced herself to listen as the woman whose name she still couldn't remember explained what she had overheard about Harry from her grandfather and the head goblin immediately following her fiancée's initial transformation. His permanent sex drive was about on the same level of an incubus, and his body needed to procreate in the same fashion that a person needed oxygen and food. He could be driven insane or worse unless his needs were satisfied, and despite that he had never tried to pressure her into having relations with him. The reason had nothing to do with a lack of attraction. Harry wanted her and she knew it. He had fought down that desperate hunger so that their first time together could be something more special than some random act of demonic lust. Realizing that cheered her a bit, though she was still upset with him for deceiving her.

"...Really, you have no right to be angry with him for fulfilling his needs."

"I don't need you to tell me that. I can forgive the sex, but he still lied to me."

"He didn't do it to cause you pain, you know that. He was just afraid of losing you."

As nice and sweet as that sounded, the truth was that the only person capable of discerning Harry's true motivations was Harry himself. Cho was a bit saddened at being forced to adopt such a distrustful attitude regarding her betrothed, but his revealed deceit necessitated it.

Perhaps with time she would again be able to trust him completely, but it wasn't going to be anything immediate. She decided that she wasn't going to leave him. His actions stung but she wasn't willing to just give up on him. Harry was a special person and she knew that no other man alive could make her even a fraction as happy as the young warlord did on a daily basis or understand her feelings as well.

"Don't be ridiculous, bitch...you almost sound as though you actually want Harry and me to work things through."

The kunoichi showed no reaction to the insult. Cho grudgingly admired the unwavering control she had over her emotions.

"That's exactly what I want to see happen. I never once intended to be a threat to you."

"Then he was never anything more to you than some thing for your amusement."

The pale-skinned female shook her head in disgust.

"Stop making base assumptions. It's quite beneath your intelligence. I can accept and acknowledge his feelings for you because I love him that much. It's really not an all or nothing concept, Chang. Harry loving you doesn't mean that he can't love me as well."

Cho started to understand things at that point. This woman had to be the other empress depicted in her uncle's prophetic inscription on Harry's breastplate. The Chinese girl had never forgotten about that afternoon by the lake, but had more recently come to assume that Su was destined to be the other girl. After all, the three were more or less involved in a ménage à trois. Listening to the Japanese woman's words, she couldn't help but imagine that Harry would be gagging at how much they were tossing the word 'love' about were he present. The warmonger avoided speaking those four letters as much as he could. The thought made her stifle a giggle, and her companion smiled in response.

"He would be disgusted to hear us talking about him like this."

“I prefer to think that he’d be pleased to see us not clawing at one another’s throats.”

Cho smirked slightly, a bit unsure as to the reason she why was lounging about and cracking jokes with her fiancée’s secret lover, a woman who had all but declared that she was in love with the warrior prince and would continue sleeping with him. Perhaps fate really had brought the three of them together. She wasn’t quite yet willing to accept the ethereal female into her relationship with Harry, but she would prefer to make that point clear with him in private.

“That’s where you’re mistaken. He would just lean right back and enjoy the show.”

“Until he got too horny to continue watching and jumped right in, at least.”

The two continued to make conversation for a while longer. The Japanese woman at last introduced herself as Hitomi, and Cho got to hear the unabridged story regarding Harry’s summer in the secluded forest village. Hitomi explained that she had not initially approached the young aristocrat with any intention of falling in love. She had planned only to tease him a bit and then instruct him in how to appease a woman in the bedroom. His overbearing charm had soon enraptured her. It was quite the little fairy tale, though Cho might have been able to appreciate it more had the proverbial Prince Charming not been engaged to marry her in a matter of months. Once she had heard more than she could handle, she changed the subject to her and Harry’s expulsion. She paid Hitomi back in spades by dramatically recounting Harry’s killing another boy in her defense, making sure to emphasize that the two would be living together at Grimmauld Place. The story exchange ended abruptly when Hitomi looked seriously at Cho.

“I’m glad that you came here today, because I have a serious request for you.”

“Rather galling of you, asking me for favors after carrying on with my boyfriend.”

“I need your help in saving him.”

Cho quirked a raven-colored eyebrow.

“I don’t quite follow. He’s not in any danger. He’s just at the Ministry.”

“I meant rescuing him from himself. The path he’s walking is a destructive one. He’s being possessed by something. The goblin chieftain called it ‘Zharrghast’ when speaking with my grandpa that night. They think it has something to do with that eerie energy sword he employs in battle. Some evil presence lives within it. I remember when he took up the weapon for the first time in the village. He almost eradicated shinobi and kunoichi in our clan that night. That creature, whatever it is, has now taken root inside Harry.”

Cho started thinking about Harry’s recent actions and came to a horrifying conclusion.

“It...makes sense, as terrible as that sounds. Harry’s been changing lately. He’s becoming more powerful and ruthless every day. I’ve seen it in his dueling practices with Su and the others, and with the manner in which he obliterated the Slytherins this morning. Everything about him is transforming, even his voice. I had thought the root lay in his losing to Voldemort last night. But...an evil presence growing inside his mind...”

She didn’t mind his changes standing by themselves. She too was evolving along with him, after all. She found his recent demonic streak quite attractive, in all honesty. His newfound attitude made her believe that he actually could destroy all that stood in their path and make those idyllic dreams into reality. She had been the one to try and cajole him into killing the headmaster while the old man was weakened. Cho was just less than enamored with the prospect that some creature was controlling Harry’s actions.

“His corruption becomes worse the more he abuses those demonic powers, and he now has that artificial arm which allows him to channel them almost limitlessly. I’m really and truly scared for him. His obsession with killing his enemies is going to destroy his soul. But there’s more to it than just that. I believe the monster feeds on his

anger and hatred and uses it to manipulate him into allowing it more freedom.”

“I see your point, but I don’t know how we can stop it. All we can do is support him.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right. We have to soothe him together and remind him that he has something worth preserving himself for. We can alleviate the pressures that he faces on a daily basis and safeguard his sanity in that way. To that end, I’m asking you to put aside your personal enmity and work with me. Constantly being at one another’s throats is only going to add more problems to those that Harry already contends with. The added pressure will make the demon’s work that much easier. So please, help me protect him.”

Cho thought for a long moment before replying with a mock pout. She felt quite trapped. She couldn’t refuse under the circumstances, lest she potentially lose her beloved. Accepting meant allowing this intruder into their life. The situation was right crummy.

“I’m supposed to be upset with that bugger and now you have me feeling sympathetic...”

“I never said that you had to let him off the hook entirely. Maybe I can ever help you in getting a little revenge on him. Call it a peace offering. Follow me. I have something interesting to show you.”

Cho followed a step behind her Japanese counterpart. She couldn’t help but notice the girl’s soft, creamy pale skin and how the sunlight seemed to be swallowed by her inky black hair. She was tall enough that she looked almost natural with a man such as Harry. She made no noise when she walked. She was a perfect ethereal goddess. She led Cho into what was apparently her bedroom and opened the closet. Cho blushed crimson upon seeing the interior contents.

“Things of this sort are rather unsubtle for a ninja, I think.”

“We all have to live a little. I chanced upon this stuff during a recent weekend excursion into Muggle London. I had planned to use it on Harry myself the next time he invariably did something to irritate me,

but you surely have much better cause. See that he gets the punishment that he so richly deserves.”

Cho reached into the closet and withdrew a black leather whip, eyeing the item with complete uncertainty.

A female conspiracy was the furthest thing from Harry’s mind as he strode deftly into the Minister’s Office. A harried Cornelius Fudge sat behind his desk nervously twirling his bowler hat as he practically yelled at an unknown man. Countless parchments were strewn about haphazardly on the ornate mahogany office piece. Harry stood in the doorway for a moment as the inept politician ranted.

“Hogsmeade destroyed! Azkaban captured! This is a disaster, a total catastrophe!”

“I understand that, Minister, but we cannot afford to panic.”

Harry decided to make his move before Fudge began to see reason. He had no desire to allow this other man to usurp his intended role as the stabilizing force. He spoke from his place with a calm voice that contained an imperceptible hint of amusement.

“It would certainly appear that you’ve had better days, Minister.”

Fudge glanced up and the mystery man whirled around as he drew his wand. He was obviously was or at some point in the past had been an Auror. The standard Ministry stooge didn’t possess reflexes like those. He was a relatively powerful wizard as well. The man looked somewhat like an old lion, with graying tawny hair and bushy eyebrows. Harry immediately thought that his rangy caricature paralleled Fenrir Greyback, though this man most likely didn’t share the alpha werewolf’s taste for human flesh. Harry just stared blankly at him for a moment and then turned his attention towards Fudge.

“Potter, thank Merlin. Finally, somebody who can explain this mess.”

Harry nodded slyly, having established his position with ease.

“That is why I’ve come here, sir. This place really is in an uproar.”

“By the way, allow me to introduce Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office. He’s now being promoted to lead the D.M.L.E. due to Madam Bones’s untimely demise during last night’s attack at Azkaban.”

Harry nodded and took a seat in the armchair next to Scrimgeour. He doubted that Fudge was particularly upset about losing Amelia Bones, as the woman had been wholly incorruptible and in a position where she could gainsay the Minister on certain issues. He was now free to fill her seat with a loyal stooge, as Harry was convinced this Scrimgeour character was.

“Most saddening indeed, Madam Bones was a good witch. Her niece and I attended Hogwarts together.”

Fudge noticed Harry’s intentional usage of the past tense and raised an eyebrow but let it pass for the moment.

“I need to know anything that you can about this Hogsmeade fiasco. I’ve gotten nothing but secondhand information to this point. The Aurors were all tied up at Azkaban and didn’t get over to Hogsmeade until it was too late.”

Harry gave a much altered version of the actual events, knowing full well that there were no other witnesses alive to contest it. He had no desire to clue Fudge in on the fact that he had a private army at his disposal.

“I was the first one there. Our least favorite Dark Lord came up with the ridiculous idea to recruit me into his ranks. He brought six Death Eaters along with him and general battle ensued when I refused to join him. I dueled with the Dark Lord while some villagers tried their best to battle against his escort. They were quickly slaughtered, but still somehow managed to buy enough time to allow Dumbledore and his vigilantes to arrive on the scene. The Dark Lord signaled in his own reinforcements and blasted me out into the general melee before being engaged with the headmaster.”

Harry abjectly refused to call Voldemort by the moniker ‘You-Know-Who’ and thus simply referred to him as the Dark Lord. He paused for

a moment, watch with a victorious gleam in his eyes as Fudge purpled upon hearing about the old man's little vigilance group. Perhaps he had been mistaken in his assumption that Percy had squealed about the Order's existence already. The pompous redhead wasn't a member, but he had to know that his parents were, or had been in his father's case.

"Dumbledore...I knew he was up to something. Building a real army this time, I see. He won't get away with it on my watch."

Harry could have laughed out loud. Lucius Malfoy had found the perfect niche prior to his incarceration. This man was comically simple to manipulate. A skilled manipulator backed by money and reputation could rule the wizarding world from behind the ministerial throne. But that wasn't enough for the ambitious young warlord. He wasn't satisfied with being the kingmaker, but would occupy the place until his own moment came. And he had a scheme that would allow him to fulfill the role in grand fashion.

"I'll give you the full details about that in a moment. Once in the larger battle, I managed to kill a giant and some nameless Death Eater grunts, as well as two inner circle members. They appeared to be twins, two lumpy little maggots..."

Scrimgeour looked over and interrupted.

"The Carrows, Amycus and Aleto. They claimed Imperius after the first rising."

Fudge's expression darkened further upon hearing about released Voldemort supporters going back into his service after being shown previous 'clemency' by the Ministry. Harry would have thought that the man would be pleased to be presented with the opportunity to collect another round of freedom bribes.

"Rufus, I want the Aurors to go out and apprehend every acquitted Death Eater from the first war. Question them carefully under Veritaserum and incarcerate whatever traitors you reveal in the Ministry's detention cells to await trial."

“Yes, Minister. I’ll get them on the job as soon as this meeting ends.”

Harry was almost impressed. Fudge was able to act decisively on occasion. He would have simply executed them all on the spot, however. He just wished that he could be present when the Aurors stormed into Hogwarts and arrested Snape. Perhaps he would be able to persuade the Minister to let him sit in on the greaseball’s questioning. He concluded his report without any more delay.

“...After several people had fallen, the Dark Lord raised them as Inferi. Remus Lupin was killed by a Death Eater from behind while battling them, causing Fenrir Greyback to sic his pack against the Dark Lord’s supporters and abandon his service. He didn’t take very kindly to his sireling being slain with a silver whip. I went back after the Dark Lord and struck him down while Dumbledore kept him occupied, and then the unthinkable happened. He instantly self-resurrected as some undead sorcerer. The headmaster referred to him as a ‘lich’ after the battle had ended. He then destroyed my left arm and vaporized into black gas.”

Fudge was both worried and confused, but Scrimgeour appeared to be terrified.

“A lich...I don’t know much about them, but this is very bad.”

“Dumbledore said that the Dark Lord would now be able to control the living dead and create entire armies from the fallen. My guess is that it should take some weeks for him to become acclimated to his newfound powers, time that we have to use to the fullest in making preparations to counter them.”

Fudge was shaking his head by this point.

“I’ll have to report this before the Wizengamot first. I’ve already summoned them to an emergency meeting tomorrow morning.”

Harry saw this as an opening to put his big plan into motion.

“I have a suggestion to make. It’s a bold move, but it will streamline the war effort.”

“Very well, my boy. Let’s hear it. No scrimping on details.”

“Have some trusted supporter within the legislature introduce a motion to declare martial law and grant emergency dictatorial powers to the Minister. This is a crisis time and we can ill afford to be hamstrung by having to place every policy initiative to a vote before the Wizengamot. The democratic process takes time that cannot be wasted. The ability to rule through executive decree would make us more efficient. I could give a statement strongly favoring the proposal to the Daily Prophet in order to secure popular support.”

Harry’s real motive was to use Fudge as his guinea pig. The people would first taste dictatorial rule under this bumbling idiot and would ideally accept the young warlord’s regime that much easier when he decided to put the Minister aside. A populace acclimated to being subjects would be much simpler to control than one used to having full democratic privilege. Better still, Fudge would be the one absorbing the initial shock. The Minister himself looked something similar to the proverbial kid in the candy store.

“Absolutely brilliant, it’s sure to be a complete success. I’ll get somebody on it right away. But first let’s hear all about Dumbledore’s vigilantes. He’s certainly plotting against the Ministry and he needs to be dealt with as soon as possible.”

Harry almost felt a little bad for what he was about to do. He was the one plotting to destabilize the Ministry, not the old man. The bird club needed to be done away with in order to take away Dumbledore’s only means through which to interfere with the winged champion’s plans. Besides, the headmaster needed to be fully dedicated to protecting Hogwarts, not sticking his crooked nose into matters that weren’t within his jurisdiction.

“He heads the Order of the Phoenix, a volunteer militia group opposed to the Dark Lord. The membership roster encompasses virtually the entire Hogwarts faculty as well as several Ministry employees, including a few Aurors. There are others as well, those with misplaced loyalties towards the old coot. I personally refused an

offer to join the Order back in early September. I had no desire to submit to Dumbledore's command."

"I need to know which Aurors are involved."

Harry sent Scrimgeour a sidelong glance.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks are the ones that I know for certain."

The Minister was shaking with anger again.

"I trusted Shacklebolt! I was planning to promote the man to Head of the Auror Office! Alanna, come in here!"

Harry twirled his wand in his hands as Fudge's secretary bounded into the office.

"I'm right here, Minister Fudge. Hey there, Harry Potter."

Harry sent her a smirk as Fudge rambled out his orders.

"Go down to the Auror Department and summon Aurors Shacklebolt and Tonks up to my office at once."

"Right away, sir. By the way, a Daily Prophet reporter has been asking for an interview."

"I don't have time for that right now. Get those Aurors up here."

The busty secretary left at that. Harry thought to play the devil's advocate and protect the two Order members from being terminated. He rather liked the thought of having two such skilled fighters owing him a favor. He also wanted to win himself a reputation for magnanimity around the Ministry, preferably at Fudge's expense. Scrimgeour apparently had similar ideas.

"Minister, instead of firing them, perhaps we should use them to root out this Order."

“I already have a plan, Rufus. Be prepared to lead a raid tonight.”

Harry said nothing until the two exposed Aurors arrived. Both seemed to know exactly what had taken place upon entering the office. Harry’s recent disaffection with the headmaster had not been any great secret within the Order. The veteran Kingsley was able to mask his reaction well, but Tonks sent the young wizard a withering glare. Scrimgeour opened up the attack before either could speak.

“Captain Shacklebolt, Auror Tonks. The Minister and I have summoned you here in hopes that you might be able to provide us with some information regarding a certain subversive organization currently operating contrary to Ministry law.”

Kingsley glanced over at Harry for a long moment and then responded.

“Unless you’re referring to the Death Eaters, I’m afraid I don’t follow, Rufus.”

Fudge jumped from his seat and slammed his palms onto his mahogany desk.

“You know full well what we mean, Shacklebolt. We know that you both are card carrying members in Dumbledore’s secret little Order of the Phoenix. Mister Potter here has done his civic duty by informing me all about that crackpot’s meddling ways, and Commander Scrimgeour and I have decided upon a special assignment for you. Explain, Rufus.”

The old Auror rose from his seat and limped towards his two dumbstruck subordinates. Harry decided to just sit back and watch the show. He wasn’t particularly pleased about Fudge directly pointing out his role in selling the Order out, even though the young wizard was guilty as sin.

“Your actions merit being fired on the spot. A Ministry Auror’s duties do not include memberships in illegal vigilante groups. But since you’re so knowledgeable about the Order of the Phoenix, the Minister and I have chosen to assign you both to conduct a raid upon the

group's next meeting. Select a dozen wands from the department and break up Dumbledore's little militia, arrest that old crackpot and his lieutenants and haul the lot of them into the Ministry to be questioned. Make clear to the rest that we know who they are, and that they are to cease operations at once or risk being charged with conspiracy against the government. Dawlish and Williamson will serve as your backup. Consider this an opportunity to prove to us that your loyalties lie with the Ministry. Dismissed."

Both nodded and made to leave without a single word, though the look on the Metamorphmagus's face betrayed her intention to ream out Harry as soon as the opportunity arose. He was far from intimidated. Compared to wizards such as Voldemort and Dumbledore, a junior Auror was laughable. Fudge took a parting shot at their backs.

"I hardly think that I should need to emphasize the fact that your jobs depend upon your performance in this mission."

The two Order members glanced at one another and nodded before turning back to Fudge.

"We understand, sir. Allow us to take our leave and make preparations."

Harry waited until Tonks and Kingsley had been gone several minutes before rising to leave as well. He couldn't stomach any more exposure to Fudge and his D.M.L.E. crony. He had accomplished his aims for the day and had no desire to make small talk.

"A splendid scheme, Minister. I have some matters to attend to in London, so I'll take my leave now. I'll explain my sudden departure from Hogwarts in full detail later. Please don't hesitate to avail yourself to whatever services I can provide regarding the war."

"Thank you for your assistance, Mister Potter. I'll certainly be in touch."

Harry shook the Minister's hand, followed by Scrimgeour's and then strode from the office with as much nonchalance as he had brought

coming in. He hadn't even crossed the threshold when a young woman flagged him down and practically ran to his position. She was an odd one, with a small frame, hot pink hair and an impish countenance with a cute little button nose. She held a large parchment scroll and an eagle quill in her hands. She couldn't have been much older than twenty. Harry sent her a lopsided grin that didn't seem to faze her much, aside from a demure smile.

"I'm with the Daily Prophet. I was just wondering whether or not the Minister was available for an interview."

Harry always knew an opportunity when he saw one, and decided to take this one.

"He's not, I'm afraid. Minister Fudge is very busy, but perhaps I could assist you."

He saw the girl's crystal blue eyes light up with restrained intelligence.

"I appreciate that, Mister Potter, but I don't want to impose..."

"It's no imposition at all, really. Two hours spent listening to rambling politicians causes a lovely lady's company to be most enticing. Let's find someplace private and I'll give you a story so scandalous that the Valentine's Day Quibbler exclusive will seem as boring as a cauldron bottom report by comparison."

"Well, you certainly seem to know the path to this girl's heart. We could Floo over to my apartment if you'd like."

Harry demurely placed an arm around the girl's petite waist and reveled in her blush.

"That sounds delightful. Allow me to regale you with the tragic tale of a young orphaned savior subjected to an abusive Muggle childhood by a self-righteous old man..."

Harry couldn't imagine a more perfect ending to his day. He had sliced out Dumbledore's kneecaps by selling out his vigilance group

and would now deal yet another crushing blow to the old man's image by telling the world about his poor upbringing with the Dursleys. The headmaster would be reeling from this one-two combination well into the future. And soon the wizarding world would be under martial law with him pulling all the strings. He was ascending into power even now.

(End Chapter Twenty-Seven)

Author's Note: No, I haven't fallen off the planet. There are several reasons for the late update, ranging from computer troubles to a torrential exam and paper deluge. I hope you all like this update. This marks the end of the Halloween arc, the major turning point in the story. Harry is no longer a student plotting a takeover, and has now become an independent entity staging one. The next chapter will likely open up at Arthur Weasley's funeral. His phantom animagus form might be making an appearance soon, but that remains to be decided. I might consider doing a short chapter detailing Harry's 'punishment' here directly, depending on the support the idea garners. Some loose ends will be tied up with the next major chapter, at any rate.

I liked the comment about Harry turning into an anime character. I don't particularly agree with it, but it was interesting nonetheless. I mean, it's not as though he can fire energy blasts from his hands or anything...wait a second. But seriously, whatever Harry does and looks like, it was never my intention to turn him into an anime character. I'll explain the reasoning behind his tendency to dress in Japanese robes soon. There was always a purpose for it, and I believe it fits in well with his character.

Hope everybody enjoys, please review, et cetera. Those of you who like the Naruto anime, I'm considering starting a story in that genre directly, so keep an eye out.

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"It's no imposition at all, really. Two hours spent listening to rambling politicians causes a lovely lady's company to be most enticing. Let's find someplace private and I'll give you a story so scandalous that the Valentine's Day Quibbler exclusive will seem as boring as an economic report by comparison."

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Harry couldn't imagine a more perfect ending to his day. He had put effectively sliced out Dumbledore's knees by selling out his vigilance group and would now deal yet another crushing blow to the old man's image by telling the world of his suffering with the Dursley's. The headmaster would be reeling from this one-two combination well into the future. And soon the wizarding world would be under martial law with him pulling all the strings. He was ascending into power even now.

Interlude Two: Burning Day – The Order's Downfall

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

Albus Dumbledore was a tired man. He was exhausted, both in body and mind and especially in his heart. The sage who had five decades prior felled the Great Grindelwald now wearily surveyed his disorganized and injured forces from the Order of the Phoenix's new and wholly inadequate meeting place at Arabella Figg's home in Little Whinging. Several members had been furious upon hearing that

Harry had disallowed the organization to continue using Grimmauld Place, but nothing could be done to change matters. The Weasley Burrow was too obvious to be a viable meeting place. The squib's humble abode was situated not even a block away from the Muggle household in which Harry Potter had passed his unhappy childhood. Albus now tearfully regretted having placed the boy in those monsters' care, the blood protections be damned. The Dursley family had thoroughly schooled the wizarding world's hope in hate and misery from the youngest age. Harry's recent interview in The Daily Prophet had made that much abundantly clear. Dumbledore had been able to sense the venom pouring from each printed word, unbridled resentment aimed directly at him.

The Dursleys would no doubt be receiving just recompense to their abusive ways soon. The public was in outrage about the horrible upbringing that their hero had endured and grumblings on the streets in Diagon Alley and elsewhere suggested that Vernon and Petunia would soon be meeting an incensed wizarding lynch mob, or Tom might slay them in order to send Harry a message. The young warrior was equally liable to return to Privet Drive and put them both to the sword personally now that he was free to move about unchecked. Albus could only pray that they would come to no harm. They were not the most tolerate or friendly sort, but their behavior towards Harry had been borne through ignorance rather than any truly premeditated hostility. Magic was a tangible entity that most Muggles simply could not comprehend and they therefore reacted violently to it due to pure natural instinct. Magical purebloods loathed Muggle science and technology in much the same fashion. Harry Potter had been a victim, but the old man would much rather the boy turn the resulting vitriol upon him rather than his relations. Albus understood his feelings, as he too had fallen into a towering rage upon fully realizing how Petunia had allowed his grandson to be treated, but still felt that to punish the Dursleys would be akin to slaughtering a caged and threatened animal when it lashed out: cruel and inhumane, and ultimately pointless.

"Here...do have some tea, Albus. Something tells me you could use a pick-me-up."

Dumbledore attempted to nod serenely but failed, managing only to jerk his head.

“Thank you, Arabella. A cuppa never fails to raise my spirits.”

Had the Headmaster's teacup contained clear water rather than steaming black Earl Grey he might have been appalled with his reflection. Dumbledore was pale and haggard and looked every second the nearly two centuries old that he was. His long white hair and beard were straggly and unkempt and his robes were the same set that he had been wearing during the battle at Hogsmeade days prior, kept only somewhat neat and unsoiled by sporadic Cleaning Charms. The usual resplendent twinkle in his eyes was dead, perhaps never again to return. His slippers were mismatched and his breathing heavy and wheezing. Harry's betrayal had truly crushed him. The somewhat bitter tea did nothing to quell his depression as a familiar growling voice sounded behind him.

“Buck up, Albus. Three days you've been mopin' about. There's still a war to be fought.”

Dumbledore let out a sigh and responded. During times like these he was eternally grateful for Moody's plan and unyielding candor. The grizzled ex-Auror never allowed his emotions to dominate him and always kept a level head in any situation. His old soldier mentality assuaged the Headmaster's rising despair far more effectively than teary lamentations or sympathetic looks and words. Albus usually looked down upon cold logic and emotionless action, but in this case it was most welcome and perhaps the only preserver keeping Dumbledore from sinking in his own regrets. Much work indeed remained to be done, with Harry Potter or otherwise. But even that thought wasn't enough to pull Albus from the maelstrom this night.

“I've lost the boy, Alastor. It's identical to Tom those many years ago. Another one has slipped through my fingers into the darkness.”

Mad-Eye Moody grunted in annoyance as he clunked over to the wooden chair next to Dumbledore's recliner and plopped down, drawing his hip flask and guzzling a long draught. His magical eye remained stationary and leveled intently on the wizard who had led

Alastor in battle through three dark risings. Moody had fought alongside Dumbledore as a junior Auror during Grindelwald's day and had served in the Order during both wars against Voldemort. Albus had never known a more stalwart and loyal adherent in all his years, not even Minerva or Rubeus. Moody was brutally honest and did not quail before the old sage's mystique, quite willing to gainsay Dumbledore when he disagreed with the Headmaster's policies. Like Minerva, Alastor had staunchly disagreed with Dumbledore's decision to place Harry with the Dursleys. Albus should have listened.

"Stop feelin' sorry for yourself, ye old coot. Potter made his own choices, but I never once woulda thought to see that boy turn to the dark side. He might have been a bit reckless and stupid at times, but I thought him to be a good kid. Seems like even my vigilant arse can be caught sleeping. Anyway, Riddle was evil from the start and you did everything you could to steer Potter right. Some things are beyond your control, Albus."

Dumbledore couldn't agree about Harry. He had tried too hard to keep the boy under control, foolishly forgetting the old maxim that a caged animal couldn't help but resist. Albus had been so very wrong to deny the boy his heritage and proper place in the wizarding world. He now knew that by being a proper mentor and helping the boy adapt to his fame and fortune, and training him both emotionally and magically for his destiny from the beginning he could have forged an unbreakable bond between them. He could have made Harry the grandson that Dumbledore had always envisioned him to be from the distance. Albus had instead chosen to deceive Harry due to some convoluted notion that he should have a normal childhood and had thus driven him to delve into the advanced sorceries alone and without guidance. The light's greatest champion had verily engineered Harry Potter's descent into dark magic.

"I could only wish that all were as simple as you say, Alastor."

"Seems like we're a bit shorthanded tonight. Not that I can say I'm surprised."

That was quite true, not that Arabella's little house could have sheltered the full Order. Molly had managed to stay her sobs long

enough to request to be excused from her duties along with her children as they mourned poor Arthur's passing. Miss Delacour was likewise absent while supporting her beloved as Bill Weasley coped with his father's death. Remus was dead as well, no doubt raising a ruckus in the next world with James and Sirius, now liberated from an existence that had given him little other than contempt and oppression. The lycanthrope had made the ultimate sacrifice to protect a young man who spat upon the gesture with his reckless attitude and flagrant disregard for human life. The man would have been in tears had he seen his cub's actions later that morning.

The Hogwarts staff was unrepresented at this gathering, Alastor excluded. Minerva was a nervous wreck resulting from the words she had exchanged with Harry following his and Miss Chang's altercation with Dumbledore in the latter's office. The boy's Head of House had kept an impassive face whilst still in Harry's presence but had broken down in tears upon leaving his observation. Severus was still convalescing under Poppy's care due to the grievous injuries that Mister Potter had inflicted upon the Potions Master. Snape had been foolish to attack Harry in the boy's full battle lust, but Albus honestly could not blame him. Severus had seen Mister Malfoy as his own much the same as Dumbledore still viewed Harry now. Had anybody slain Harry as the latter had murdered Draco, Albus would have assaulted the perpetrator with ferocity that not even Tom or Alphonse had ever seen. Dumbledore had killed only once in his entire existence but would gladly have done an encore in that situation, and that would have included Severus had the man succeeded in what had no doubt been his intention against Harry.

Whatever Harry's accursed weapon truly was, its effects had devastated Severus. His amputated arm was only the beginning. The noxious energy that comprised the blade seemed to absorb magical power, as it had also taken in Dumbledore's last spell directed at Tom in Hogsmeade right as the Dark Lord had made his escape. Severus likewise reported that Harry had dissipated a curse with the weapon. The blade had apparently stolen the Potions Master's magic in the nearby tissue as well as violated its ability to regenerate. Severus could not ever receive a magical replacement for his destroyed arm because his body had no magic on the entire right side, and thus the spell could not bond to his flesh. The man could still perform magic

with his other hand, but his magical reservoir being ruptured and permanently depleted on one side meant that his power was drastically weakened and unstable. Despite his dueling prowess, Severus Snape could not perform spellwork or battle on a level much beyond that exhibited by a junior student at Hogwarts. Dumbledore's heart bled for the man. Severus had always tried to combat his physical ugliness and constant loneliness through his considerable talents and now Harry had seized that away due to pure spite. He had destroyed Snape in nearly every fashion that a proud wizard could be and had made him live to suffer the indignity. He could not even function as the Order's spy any longer. Tom would no doubt view his debilitated condition as a liability and kill him should he attend another Death Eater gathering.

"...Albus, I'm talkin' to you here."

Dumbledore slowly halted his recollections and turned to Moody.

"My apologies. My thoughts are a bit jumbled tonight. I'll need you to repeat that."

Moody airily waved his gnarled and calloused hand about Arabella's crowded sitting room. Every face was somber and clouded with doubt. Morale within the Order was at its all-time lowest point due to Azkaban and Hogsmeade both falling and two highly respected members being killed in action in one terrible night, one being a skilled and powerful fighter in Remus Lupin.

"I said that you should get this meeting started. These people need some distraction."

"We will commence as soon as Nymphadora and Kingsley arrive from the Ministry."

Moody jerked his head in acknowledgement and Albus again became absorbed in his thoughts, which returned to the past few days' constant subject. Dumbledore had been wholly optimistic that the situation with Harry was going to work out marvelously mere days before the Halloween disaster. He had felt like a proud grandfather when Harry had confided the news regarding his engagement to Miss

Cho Chang prior to telling even his closest friends. Dumbledore has always been amused with observing him as he pursued the pretty Chinese Ravenclaw. At one time he had hoped that Harry would notice Miss Ginevra Weasley's obvious infatuation with him and return her feelings, but the Headmaster knew during the boy's third year that it was not to be. One Miss Chang had gotten involved with Cedric Diggory during the Triwizard Tournament, several bored and frankly nosey faculty members had started a gambling pool as to which school champion would finally win her heart and when. Sadly, the question had been resolved with Cedric's premature death at Tom's hands. For his part, Albus Dumbledore had placed a heavy wager on Harry.

Dumbledore had seen several Potters come through Hogwarts during his tenure and had observed one singular constant. Potter men did not indulge in meaningless crushes. They selected their mates early on, just as James had with Lily, and pursued them with unrelenting fervor until their prey gave in and romance blossomed. Poor Harry had been sorely lacking in guidance regarding the fairer sex but had succeeded all the same. He was lost to Miss Chang the very moment he had laid eyes upon her in midair on the Quidditch Pitch, and vice versa. Their engagement had convinced Albus that Harry was not lost to the darkness. After all, light still remained with him so long as he could experience love.

But Harry had done the unthinkable and corrupted the heart's purest light. Miss Chang turned to the darkness along with him, willingly polluting her own gentle and demure soul in order to remain alongside her chosen. Rather than being his beacon and pulling out him from the abyss, she instead dove in with him and indeed anchored him down even more. The damned girl had aided Harry in placing this binding curse upon Dumbledore prior to their exodus by snatching his wand, and he had heard her attempting to prod him into returning to kill the Headmaster as they descended the staircase. Harry's inborn charisma was such that she was willing to accept the blackness within him and infect her own heart despite her initial beau being slain by a Dark Lord. Despite the boy's snide comments, love was an extremely powerful force, and Harry had somehow managed to twist it into an evil instrument.

Not that Albus should have been surprised. Harry had exhibited remarkable skill in swaying others to his bidding. Dumbledore recalled a younger Lord Voldemort making his bid to be hired on as Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor at Hogwarts not long after Albus had been appointed as Headmaster. Dumbledore had seen through his ruse and deciphered his true intention, that being to prep and recruit Death Eaters directly at Hogwarts. Harry had succeeded where Tom had failed, securing several students' loyalties through teaching the D.A. during the previous term. Even the subject had been identical. Those same children, as well as several others converted by said people, would later declare loyalty to Harry's twisted ideals. Albus now believed that Harry had indoctrinated them against both the school and the Ministry and educated them in the Dark Arts during their group excursions. The strongest, brightest and most creative students among the upper years at Hogwarts had departed the school in unison due to their leader's expulsion. Harry had recruited and trained a small army right under Dumbledore's nose.

Stereo Apparition cracks heralded the last two remaining members arriving near the front entrance to Mrs. Figg's house. Tonks had nearly landed on Arabella's cat. Mr. Tibbles let out a hiss and scampered into the kitchen. Both Aurors were dressed in their uniform robes and had their wands out. Kingsley's face was fixed with a stoic expression while Tonks appeared to be almost in tears. Albus immediately knew that something was amiss but opted to feign ignorance and smiled wearily. Moody seemed to get the hint as well and he slowly ceased his hand's descent towards his wand and growled out his greeting.

"It's about time you two showed up."

Shacklebolt made no move as he and Tonks separated and moved to create a perimeter. Albus stifled a curse as a low hum indicated Anti-Apparition wards being clamped down around the property. The Headmaster could shatter them easily enough given time, but time was not a commodity that he was likely to be granted in this situation. His energies were still drained due to his grueling battle with Tom in the burning village.

“We didn’t want this to happen, Albus. I can only hope you’ll believe that.”

Dumbledore braced himself for the inevitable as the scene degenerated into an absolute din. Aurors and Hit Wizards began streaming into the little house, some via Apparition and others through the primary and rear entrances. Albus and Alastor immediately drew their wands and stood with their backs to one another. Dumbledore recognized a perennial Fudge lackey in Auror Dawlish heading a trio coming in through Arabella’s Floo, effectively blocking the only remaining escape. Not that anybody would have time to use the fireplace anyway.

“Alastor...we cannot afford to battle here.”

“I ain’t going down without a fight, Albus. Unless you can see some other option...”

The situation was desperate. Dumbledore hadn’t had time to ward Arabella’s house against a hostile invasion such as this. The Order was outnumbered and outclassed. There were at least twenty combined Ministry wands present and less than ten belonging to Dumbledore’s vigilantes. Albus and Alastor were the only capable Order fighters present and the Headmaster lacked the requisite energy to take down this many foes. Ministry Aurors had far superior training when compared to typical Death Eaters and wouldn’t be incapacitated nearly as easily. The Ministry’s forces weren’t in perfect condition either due to their battle at Azkaban, but they were still more than enough to trounce the Order in its present state. Albus had to negotiate, praying that the Aurors would be sufficiently intimidated by his reputation to be willing to bargain.

“Put your wand down and surrender, Headmaster Dumbledore. The same to you, Retired Senior Auror Captain Moody. You people are all under arrest, charged with subversion and conspiracy to destabilize the Ministry of Magic.”

Albus recognized the voice as belonging to Rufus Scrimgeour, the Auror Commander. He then lowered his wand but did not drop it. Moody stared gobsmacked at the old man and did not follow, though

he made no hostile moves. The other Order members just seemed to be overwhelmed at the current situation. They had never seen any substantial combat and were quite helpless when lined up against trained wands. Dumbledore attempted to defuse the situation. The last thing that needed to happen was to have somebody lose their cool and start a battle.

“Be reasonable, Commander Scrimgeour. Nobody has committed any crimes here.”

Rufus scoffed and retorted in a condescending tone.

“Hold your crap until the Wizengamot. Our source has told us all about your illegal vigilance group.”

This had to be Harry's doing. So this was his new game, Albus realized with no small disappointment. Hiding behind the Ministry while he schemed, using the government as a shield to obscure his activities just as he had at Hogwarts. He was following the example that one Lucius Malfoy had set, manipulating Cornelius Fudge with slick words and hefty contributions. He had sold out the Order to cement his new alliance with the Ministry. No planted operative could have withstood Dumbledore's potent Legilimency. Kingsley and Tonks never would have betrayed the Order on their own. This move represented Harry's coup de grace against Albus. The boy had struck at his heart by going dark, had effectively delivered the death knell to his public credibility through his interview in the papers, and was now destroying his militia and subjecting good and well-meaning people to arrest and prosecution. Harry Potter had truly abandoned any shame and integrity he once had.

“We're clear here, Minister.”

Albus looked up with cold fury in his eyes as some nameless Auror made this declamation and Cornelius Oswald Fudge swaggered through the main entrance, looking as though he had just been crowned a king.

“Dumbledore, old boy! You're looking like Hell, man. Seems like we've got you red handed this time.”

"It would certainly appear so, Cornelius. I extend all the proper congratulations."

Fudge tutted and wagged his finger at Dumbledore.

"Don't be such a poor sport. Surely you knew I would catch onto you sooner or later."

"This is preposterous, Minister. There is no law against peaceful assembly."

"Ah, but you've been doing much more than that. I know all about it. Harry Potter has been more than happy to provide me with details about this Order's activities, trying to keep the boy a virtual prisoner in his own home during the summer and all that. Then there's the whole issue with you taking these weekend warriors and leaping headlong into battles properly left fought by trained Aurors. This gang mentality simply won't do, Dumbledore."

Alastor launched into a diatribe upon confirmation that Harry had sold out the Order.

"That stinkin', treacherous little cockroach. When I get my hands around his neck..."

Scrimgeour moved and pressed his wand against the retired Auror's throat, naturally covered by five other wizards.

"Don't implicate your person further by making threats, Moody."

"I'll say whatever I bloody well like, parchment pusher. I'd like to see ye shut me up."

"Enough, Alastor."

Moody clammed up at Dumbledore's authoritative tone. Fudge wasn't so bright.

"Now see here, Dumble..."

"I have seen and heard enough, Cornelius. Since this witch hunt is not going to end until I've been hauled before the Wizengamot, I will grant your desire. Allow my comrades to leave and I will surrender my wand and come along quietly. Decline and we will have no other recourse than to conduct battle here, and I can guarantee that the entire Ministry's might will not be sufficient to overcome this old man."

Fudge seemed to be deep in thought momentarily, but then nodded. His greedy eyes shone with anticipation.

"Very well then, that seems equitable enough. Come quickly now. This should be the very thing I need to get this new emergency measure passed in the Wizengamot. Albus Dumbledore leading insurgents bent on tearing down the Ministry. Not happening on my watch. Aurors Tonks and Shacklebolt, do escort the esteemed professor to a detention cell until we can question him."

Dumbledore curtly handed his wand to Scrimgeour and allowed Tonks and Shacklebolt to lead him away. Kingsley looked away with a scowl. He was obviously trying his damndest not to curse Fudge into his namesake. Moody looked murderous as they led the old man outside. Once the trio was out in the cold morning air, Tonks finally lost control and hugged Dumbledore with tears flowing down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Albus. There wasn't anything I could do."

"Do not fret on my account, Nymphadora. There are greater players at work here."

Dumbledore gave a reassuring smile and patted the young Auror on the head even as he listened to Fudge and Scrimgeour commanding the Order to disband the threatening treason charges should they be caught engaging in future vigilante activities. His anger towards Harry was boiling even more than it had been upon the boy's expulsion. He still loved Harry with all his heart, but he now discovered the resolve to deal with him as needed. The young wizard surely did not intend to remain loyal to the Ministry. He was no doubt already plotting to break Fudge and seize true political power now that he had

effectively crippled Albus. The Headmaster believed that Harry was a better alternative to Voldemort, and even believed in the egalitarian society that his ideals would bring about. But still, change could not be forced. Harry was young and ambitious, and did not consider the pain and upheaval that would result upon tearing down ancient prejudices by simple decree. Changing the wizarding world was not nearly so easy, and yet more violence would surely come about once Harry realized this and lost his patience. Albus could not allow the people to suffer so.

But Dumbledore could do little against Harry at that exact moment, what with the Prophecy still protecting the boy and the Order now disbanded. He had little recourse other than to wait patiently and observe events as they developed. He would survive this trifling inconvenience and sooner or later Harry and Tom would have their final showdown and one would emerge the victor. After that the Prophecy would be voided and matters could be dealt with as needed. He could only pray that he would never have to raise his wand against Harry. Doing so would shatter the already cracked and bruised pieces that comprised his heart. Should that come to pass, Albus prayed that the battle would claim his own existence as well. He too deserved to die, as his unsteady hands were those that had molded Harry into the creature that he had become. Perhaps he could at least become the grandfather and mentor to Mister Potter in the next world that he had so miserably failed to be in this one.

(End Interlude Two)

Author's Note: Extremely tired at the moment, so comments are to come in when I get back from class tomorrow. Another full chapter hopefully to come this weekend. I know this wasn't the length that some would have wanted, but I wanted to get Dumbledore's take on recent events and the scene was too long to fit into my next chapter plans. No Harry/Cho S&M, simply because I think it would be too far OOC for him to play along with it. More extensive thoughts will be posted later, so check back late tomorrow should you be interested.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Two Funerals and a Battlefield – Solidifying Alliances

Disclaimer: If you've seen it before, it belongs to J.K. Rowling. Otherwise, it's mine. Naturally, I'm making no money off this.

“And now we consecrate this spot, where Remus Jay Lupin begins the eternal journey.”

Harry had never thought that he would attend a werewolf funeral ceremony. Yet there he stood, face expressionless in his black mourning robes. There had to be nearly a hundred lycanthropes in attendance, golden eyes burning with resentment like so many shining topazes. He was the only actual wizard at this ritual, invited especially by Fenrir Greyback due to his close relationship with the deceased. Cho and others had wanted to come as well, but Greyback was a new ally and somewhat hostile to humans in general and so bringing others along who weren't invited would not have been a smart move. Harry was normally not one to deny his beloved consort anything, but this was as much business as it was mourning, and had to be handled as such. He didn't even know where he was, only that the area was desolate and in the countryside somewhere. Greyback was serving as master of ceremonies, giving the proper farewell to his greatest rival for control over his people according to the werewolf culture that he personally created. The dakaathi hybrid had to admit that seeing the hulking brute dressed in worn red shaman's robes and wildly waving a blazing torch about as he gave the rites was a somewhat surreal experience.

“We light this pyre, and send our brother on his path with pride and our regard.”

Greyback then turned to the spot where Lupin lay atop a funeral pyre and lit the wood. Whatever it had been doused with was highly combustible, as the whole stack was immediately engulfed in an inferno and Moony's body began to slowly disintegrate into ash. Every werewolf present let out a long and melancholic howl in unison, the last and loudest to do so being the alpha male. The mourners then began to disperse, some unabashedly casting glares at the only human present. Harry had a short silver sword girded underneath his robes just in case, but thankfully didn't need to withdraw it. Eventually only Harry and Greyback remained. The young warlord was

determined not to waver until nothing remained but ashes. He owed that much to the man who had run to his death due to the winged demon's arrogance. He kept his stare fixed on Lupin's burning body, only hearing the other walking over to his position.

"He was a good man. I'll never forget the sacrifice he made that Halloween night."

"He died like a true warrior. We never agreed on much, but I respect him now."

Harry sent Greyback a sidelong glance, never really moving his eyes.

"I too would hope that wizards and werewolves can one day live in harmony."

Greyback gave a rather nasty snort.

"Never gonna happen. Wizards are too damned ignorant and scared. There ain't no peace. We've been oppressed too long and now it's time to get ours back. I thought maybe Voldemort was gonna give us our chance, but then his lapdog turned around and killed my own blood cub. Goes to show we can't really rely on anybody."

"And yet you came to me as a willing ally in battle."

The savage alpha's reply was growled out in vicious anger. Harry tensed his claw arm nervously. Fenrir Greyback was not one to be messed with lightly, even though the young warrior could best him in combat with relative ease. Brute strength mattered little against the ruinous powers Harry had at his disposal.

"You're not some regular human. You don't smell like one, and I'd bet Lupin knew it too. But now you're working with the Ministry, and I ain't throwing my cubs out to die bailing out people who treat us like rabid animals. I helped you then, but that's all. You're at this ceremony tonight as my guest, but once you leave you're no longer welcome in our circles. Come back again and I'll turn you into dinner, Golden Boy."

Harry closed his eyes as Lupin's body disintegrated at last, wishing the old lycanthrope a happier existence in the next world than he had in this one. He should have expected that Greyback wouldn't take well to his new alliances, but he didn't want to alienate him entirely. Deep down Harry understood that the alpha was smarter and more complex than his savage disposition let on and that he truly wanted to strive towards his pack's betterment. On that account they could reach a working accord.

"My loyalties are not with this corrupt government. I will set Fudge aside soon and take over and create a new world, but Dumbledore severed our ties and I needed to go somewhere. Minister Fudge is a stupid little gnome and his days are numbered."

Greyback reached into his robes and pulled out a dirty brown bottle. Harry wrinkled his nose in distaste at the Muggle corn liquor. He really wasn't a drinker at all, but his tastes were more centered towards sweet wines on the rare occasions that he did imbibe. At least the older man didn't pressure him to have any. He downed the bottle with one long chug and tossed it into the still roaring pyre with a choking belch.

"Yeah, I read the Prophet article. Nasty little vermin, Muggles are."

Harry shrugged. Vernon and Petunia were indeed scum, but not worth talking about. He hadn't even needed to pleasure the young reporter to get the spin he wanted on the article. The girl was extremely dedicated to her work, and hadn't even thought about sex once she had gotten into taking down her notes. He hadn't been all that hugely interested in exploring her body anyway and had been a bit pleased that he hadn't needed to take her between the sheets to get his business accomplished that day. He had sown his oats awhile during previous months but was now interested in larger and broader pursuits than adding more notches onto his sexual belt.

"The point is that I can help your people, and that I want to, but I also need your help."

"So this is some serious shite. Fine, tell me what you've got in mind."

Harry steeped his hands and cracked his knuckles loudly.

“That depends on what you want. I can promise to see all the Ministry’s legislation against your people repealed, and then we can work something out. We can try to assimilate your people into magical society, or I can cede your pack a large land area to live upon and govern yourselves. An independent lycanthrope state, in other words.”

Greyback almost looked human at that moment as he considered the matter. Harry had been a bit worried that the rangy lycanthrope would see the proposal as tossing his people onto some reservation so that humans wouldn’t have to be around them and be angered, even though that wasn’t his intent at all. But that didn’t seem to be the case now.

“...A land to call our own. It’s more than I ever imagined.”

Harry smirked victoriously. It was so good to have the resources needed to make contracts in his grasp. This deal was much sweeter than anything Voldemort would have ever given Greyback and would thus keep him and his underlings happy and loyal to the young warlord’s cause and designs. Riddle would have allowed them to sate their vengeance on human wizards during the war, but once it was over they would have still been his servants and in no better position relative to what they had in the old order.

“Voldemort would never have given you such a thing, that’s a certainty. As it happens, I have a large plot that should be more than suitable. There’s an enchanted wood out behind Gringotts. My ancestor charmed the place and bound it in neverending darkness. It’s large enough to support well over a thousand people at its maximum development and there are some structures there now in the central area.”

“I want to take a look at this place, and then we’ll talk about alliances.”

That was easy enough thanks to Harry’s handy Portkey necklace. He decided that he really ought to learn to Apparate at some point. He

knew that Greyback was going to accept his proposal. Having the werewolves move into the old shinobi village and the surrounding woods would more or less keep them contained with the goblins as a guard. Harry didn't entirely trust Fenrir Greyback not to renege on a potential deal at some point should it suit him and so it would be rather convenient to have his men penned in to an extent. After all, the alpha had originally jumped ship against Riddle on a mere whim, while Remus had still been alive and battling. He didn't at all intend to persecute or even control the werewolves, but it was always better to take precautions against treachery.

"We can do that, but I have a certain loose end that needs tying up as well..."

The young warlord reached into his robes and withdrew a parchment that had arrived earlier the previous evening, tossing it to Greyback with a careless sidearm motion. He had received several such messages in the past, but this one no doubt had malicious intent.

"Watercress Alley...not my usual stomping grounds, I must say."

"...I have a standing liaison that needs to be terminated. Bring your appetite and some trusted hands along. I need Narcissa Malfoy done away with. She knows several things about me that I can't risk her going to Voldemort with. I killed her son a week or so back and I daresay she's intending to make a try at vengeance during this arranged tryst. I don't think she'll be willing to admit our little relationship and risk death by either the Dark Lord or her husband, but it would still be wise to prepare against an ambush."

Harry was almost offended that Narcissa thought him so stupid as to walk unawares into such an obvious trap, though he couldn't say he was surprised. Mrs. Malfoy had always been exceedingly arrogant, somehow managing to keep that smug superiority even when begging him to supply her needy body. It was only natural that she would assume that a sixteen year old Gryffindor would never be able to see through her ridiculous plan. There could be no chance that her intentions were anything less than murderous. She had loved her useless spawn despite Draco's rampant idiocy. Harry had been growing increasingly disgusted with plowing that vinegary bitch all the

time anyway, especially given that her gathered intelligence was mostly useless drivel.

“Consider it done, boss. I’ve always wanted to take a nice big bite outta Lucius’s little peach anyway.”

Greyback licked at his mangy chops in anticipation as he spoke. Harry secretly thought that the alpha’s noxious breath would asphyxiate Narcissa long before the bloodthirsty lycanthrope’s yellowed canines even made contact. He could hardly imagine a worse way to die. The young warrior clapped his hands in approval.

“Excellent, then let’s go have that look at your pack’s new home.”

And with that the oddest pair wizarding Britain ever did see Portkeyed away to London and another group was added to the grand army. With the werewolves on board and their alpha male as a loyal supporter, Harry’s overall goal seemed a little bit closer and it was only too bad that Remus wasn’t around to join alongside his brethren. Harry took one last look at the smoldering pyre as the outdoor scene exited his sight.

Early December saw Harry attending yet another funeral, this one to honor Arthur Weasley. The deceased was the only person he had really known at Lupin’s ritual cremation but that wasn’t the case at all here. Over a hundred mourners were congregated despite an escalating snowstorm at the Ottery St. Catchpole cemetery to attend Arthur’s eulogy and burial and most were at least acquaintances. Wizarding tradition stipulated a month’s mourning prior to the ceremony, though exceptions could be made on occasion. Magical bodies took much longer to decompose than those without, as the magical energy contained within the soul acted almost as a natural preservative. How long a body could remain intact due to magic depended on the wizard’s strength. Somebody like Dumbledore could take close to a century to begin decomposing.

The gathering almost seemed to be segregated into groups. Harry was standing up near the casket right among the surviving Weasleys. Cho was on his right arm, both wearing expressionless looks. She hadn’t ever known Ron’s dad but was still present to be at Harry’s side. A scowling Ron was on Harry’s other, with Hermione on his.

Molly Weasley was taking point and was tearing up right at the casket. Even Percy was making an honest attempt at consoling the woman, now recovered from the severe beating that Harry had put on him at the Ministry a month prior. Those among the winged warrior's vassals who were close with Ron or the other student Weasleys in some manner were also in attendance. These made up the main mourning party in the center. To one side were Dumbledore and his group, representing the now disbanded Order of the Phoenix. McGonagall and Hagrid were present from Hogwarts. One the other was Cornelius Fudge and the Ministry party, several Aurors and Mr. Weasley's coworkers.

Harry's bold plan had succeeded, at least to an acceptable degree. The Wizengamot had at last voted ten days prior to grant Minister Fudge emergency despotic powers, but as expected the measure had been greeted with more than a little skepticism and protest on the streets. Now the people needed to see that this streamlined government could be more effective against Voldemort than the previous cumbersome democracy had been. Luckily things had already hit rock bottom on Halloween night and there was nowhere to go but up. The Dark Lord had been relatively quiet during the past month as he recuperated, allowing the Ministry to shore things up all over the country. Rufus Scrimgeour was proving to be much more proactive atop the D.M.L.E. than the late Amelia Bones had been and had commanded the Aurors and Hit Wizards to undertake extra training with spells to combat vampires and the living dead, as well as having the wards augmented as needed at various important locations. Dark Mark checks and Veritaserum questionings were now routine procedure within the Ministry's combat corps and at least three Death Eater spies had been rooted out and speedily executed on treason charges during November. The disaster that was 31 October 1996 would not be repeated.

Dumbledore, on the other hand...that had been an adventure. Harry had never really expected Fudge and his cronies to succeed in hauling the almighty Headmaster into the Ministry as a captive. Albus had so easily thwarted them during the Marietta Edgecombe situation the previous year, and he had some competent backup in a couple choice Order members. The Minister was truly an imbecile. Fracturing the bird club would have been more than enough, but the corrupt

politico couldn't resist trying to take it all. Placing Dumbledore in prison would have made Hogwarts into a sitting duck. Only the ordained Headmaster could control the school's wards and he needed to be in the castle or on the grounds to allow them to work properly. Harry had been in his large bedroom enjoying some quality time with Cho and Su when an urgent call came into his personal hearth. Word about Albus's arrest had quickly made it back to the school and had spread like the proverbial wildfire. Hermione had wasted no time in making sure that Harry knew via the fireplace in Gryffindor Tower. The demon hybrid strung together some impressive expletives and rushed to dress and go to the Ministry during the night. Some quick words with the Minister had convinced the man that keeping Dumbledore in custody wasn't necessary, and that exposing and conquering the Order was the important political victory.

Back in the present, Harry tried to listen as Arthur's old assistant and sole employee in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, an old wizard named Pickins or something, took his turn at speaking during the eulogy. He thought it sad that the ancient ghoul had outlived his much younger boss. There seemed to be an unnatural chill in the air, and one not associated with the raging blizzard taking place at the moment. Harry's initial thoughts hovered around Dementors, but this wasn't quite the same experience. He couldn't validate it, but it was almost as though Death had its body hand grasping his heart. The icy sensation plunged clear into his soul. A warm hand grasped his and brought him back into reality.

"Harry...something isn't right here."

"There's something wicked in the air here. Keep your wits about you."

Harry then became quite acutely aware that they were in a cemetery. He didn't like to think that anything would happen here, that not even Voldemort would stoop to attack a man's burial ceremony. That small hope was in vain however, as a telltale green light struck the droning Perkins where he stood and killed him on the spot. Pandemonium ensued as the gathered attempted to ascertain what exactly had happened in the near blinding snowstorm, and some panicked and ran about screaming. Three Aurors in Fudge's escort hurled curses back at the area where the Killing Curse had originated. An inhuman

groan indicated that at least one had connected. Harry heard something like the earth being ripped open close to his position. The demon hybrid whirled on the spot. There was a large hole in the snow at a grave marker and slowly lumbering towards his position was a partially decomposed witch's corpse, animated and brandishing a rotting wand. He didn't wait to see whether or not the creature could use it.

"Avada Kedavra."

Harry's own Unforgivable struck the undead in the chest. The reanimated witch collapsed on the spot, which the winged champion thought to be rather odd. The phenomenon almost made it seem as though these veritable zombies still had living souls. The Killing Curse should have been useless against somebody who was already dead. Harry had cast it instinctually and had expected to have to try something else the very moment it had come out. There was no time to think about the strange happening though, as he could see several blurred silhouettes stumbling towards his position in the distance as two more reanimated wizards tossed spells in his direction. One was streaking right at him and easily dodged but the other was misaimed and headed at Cho.

"Watch out. Stay behind me and counterattack."

Harry stood his ground and blocked the incoming spell with his claw arm. Cho did as instructed and sent back a nasty Blasting Curse that destroyed the hapless creature's head. Decaying skin and brain matter sprayed everywhere along with splintered cranial pieces. A Bone Breaking Curse snapped the other's spine, though Harry didn't know who had sent it due to the poor visibility. At that point spells were being exchanged on all sides. These undead wizards were still able to use their magic and strategize in battle. They certainly weren't mere mindless Inferi. Voldemort had learned to tap into his new powers and this was the combat test. Still, these enemies didn't seem as strong or skilled as living magic users. Death did take its toll.

"Avada Kedavra."

Might as well stick with what works, Harry mused. He had come to like the euphoric sensation that came with using the most Unforgivable Curse there was. No wonder Voldemort was so predisposed to using it as well. He recalled that he had once sneered at the Dark Lord's general monotony in spell selection, but other dark curses didn't compare. The young warlord could vary his arsenal quite well as needed, and he would have to now. His Killing Curse struck the incoming skeletal undead but did nothing. This one had no wand and only lunged at Harry with outstretched hands. He sidestepped and pierced through its midsection with his blood ruby claw arm, heaving the corpse over his shoulder and tossing it several yards away. Spells came soaring at him in two directions. They all missed, but the implication was quite clear.

"Shite...we need to move, Cho. We'll get blasted by our own people otherwise."

"This is like some bad horror novel. Incendio."

"I've never read one, so I wouldn't know...Osum Crema."

The two betrothed took their shots while moving towards the other living combatants. Harry's curse did much more damage, melting his target into nothingness, but Cho's did respectable damage as well to another. The pair quickly escaped no man's land and closed ranks with the other wizards and witches. Some were already wounded. Ginny was on the ground clutching at severely broken leg. Some St. Mungo's healers were among the mourning party and were tending to the casualties as well as they could.

"I can't see a thing, mate. This is bloody ridiculous."

Harry shielded against an incoming hex and sprayed boiling oil in its general originating point and then regarded Ron. The youngest male Weasley was brandishing his silver mace and had an almost insane glint in his blue eyes as he brought it down on an approaching undead's arm. The rotten appendage sizzled as the sacred metal made contact and then separated, spilling down onto the snowy ground with an unceremonious tumble. He decided that he didn't even want to know what had possessed Ron to bring a weapon along

to his sire's burial. The redhead delivered two more blows to the reanimated wizard's head and chest, sending it down to the ground in convulsions until it stopped moving.

"Though I agree completely, it's too bad I don't know how to control the weather."

"Agreed. Stand clear and I will dispel this blizzard."

That was Dumbledore, who snapped out a spell that sent a pure golden light at a ponderously advancing enemy group that scattered them and then pointed his wand into the air. An enormous sunlight-colored pillar streaked upward into the sky and exploded outward. The storm clouds in the sky dissipated and the snow ceased coming down, and the sun shined down upon the Ottery St. Catchpole graveyard. The restored visibility allowed all present to see the situation, and it wasn't anything good. Arthur's plot was most inconveniently located near the cemetery's center, leaving the mourners surrounded on all sides by the still rising undead. On one side the Aurors ringed a complete circle around Fudge. The Minister was ranting and raving like a lunatic about how everybody needed to protect him.

"That is what you have allied with, Harry. Take a good look."

Harry chuckled at Dumbledore's angry tone as he picked up a nearby skeleton by the throat with his clawed appendage and hurled it into two advancing undead. He then blasted all three with his trademark shockwave spell. Even now the old coot would presume to lecture him.

"For the moment, at least. I'll use him until he can be used no longer and then we'll see."

The Headmaster sighed and shook his wizened head as he waved his wand and enclosed several walking corpses in a fiery ring. They wouldn't be going anywhere else. Cho had turned back to assist in treating the wounded, knowing that her spell contribution was almost nothing with both Harry and Dumbledore in that area. The Weasleys were all battling in a tight cluster close to the young warrior's location

as well, the injured Ginny excluded. The demon hybrid only barely dodged a swiping blow near his blind side. Upon turning he realized that the assailant was the same witch he had put down earlier with the Killing Curse. He grunted with annoyance upon realizing that Voldemort's undead minions seemed almost impossible to put down.

"Pugile."

The hapless creature was blasted well across the graveyard and collided with a large memorial. Harry absentmindedly noticed that the zombie whose head Cho had blown asunder earlier was also up again and wandering about aimlessly. More corpses continued to emerge and animate even while the existing ones stood up time and again no matter how much damage was done to them. This impromptu battle had been perilous to begin with and now it was threatening to become a slaughter. The undead that Dumbledore had trapped walked right through his flaming barrier, continuing their single minded advance even as their rotten tissue burned away and their bones baked to a bleached white. Even the normally unshakeable Albus seemed a bit rattled.

"So this is the Lich's power...it is even worse than I had dreaded."

Harry had to agree, his usual enmity towards the old man cast aside by their mutual desperation. They would have to cooperate in order to overcome this situation. At least he wasn't being rescued like some helpless child as he had been at Hogsmeade.

"This battle is endless. These things won't stay down at all."

"Do not abandon your control. Perhaps we must destroy their bodies entirely rather than simply knocking them down. Deletrius."

Albus's spell collided with an incoming skeleton. The monster wavered transparent a moment and then swirled and phased into nothingness. It worked, but individual targeting would only get them overwhelmed. Dumbledore's heat hadn't been intense enough, but perhaps Harry's version would do the trick.

“That was good, but entirely too slow. I can do better. Novus Incendio.”

Dumbledore had banished one skeleton and the younger wizard's enormous fireball then went streaking into the remainder and reduced them to ashes. Their side was starting to make a noticeable dent in Voldemort's undead ranks but the others weren't doing nearly as well. The Weasleys were having the toughest time, being right in the center and standing against the largest enemy concentration. Molly and her children were stemming the tide and nothing more. Fudge's seasoned Auror guards had also discovered the winning strategy and were slowly thinning the undead ranks on their side. The sheer numbers still threatened to overwhelm the Ministry wands, however. Harry wondered why the Ministry hadn't sent some shock troops to relieve this assault. Surely word had managed to reach their headquarters that Minister Fudge was under direct attack.

“Oh Merlin...not this...Tom, this time you have gone truly beyond the pale...”

“I'd say he crossed over that line decades ago, old man. But this is intolerable...”

“...Dad...no...don't do this...wake up...”

“This is terrible, Harry. Please, you've got to stop this madness somehow.”

Albus and Harry voiced their thoughts, joined by the wounded Ginny and a somewhat emotional Cho. Voldemort's damnable necromancy had at last touched the deceased Arthur Weasley. The middle-aged redhead stood upright inside his casket with his wand drawn. His eyes were rolled back into his skull and a black expression was on his visage. All the Weasleys were understandably distraught at this development. This grievous insult would cost Riddle and his servants in blood. The demon hybrid would see to that. Harry knew that this wasn't his battle, though. Neither was the always kind-hearted Headmaster advancing to intervene. Bill strode up to meet Arthur, taking it to be his responsibility as the new Weasley patriarch to battle

against his corrupted sire. Charlie and in a slight surprise Percy both moved to stand beside him, wands at the ready.

Harry absently crushed a couple undead into jelly with a high-powered bludgeoning spells and watched the battle. He expected the three Weasley sons to stop the dead man within minutes. Arthur had never been a strong duelist and his two eldest sons easily surpassed him in both power and in technique, while Percy wasn't a complete slouch either. Bill in particular was on a much higher level than his dad. However, Arthur came out attacking on a level that even Harry would be pressed to match. His magical energy was entire leagues higher than it had ever been while the man was alive and he was using extreme level Dark Arts against his sons. Arthur seemed to be radiating a sickening aura that the winged warrior recognized as something he'd experienced in the past. He turned to the old man in order to seek his opinion.

"Dumbledore...this sensation...it's exactly like..."

Albus gave a curt nod, his blazing electric eyes narrowed in anger and concentration.

"Indeed, Harry...that aura belongs to Lord Voldemort. There can be no mistake."

"Then we shouldn't be standing here. Those three have no chance against him."

As though accentuating the point, Voldemort lazily banished Charlie into a headstone. The dragon handler's spine connected at breakneck speed with the grave marker's edge and snapped with a sickening squelch. He was not ever likely to walk again. Fleur immediately rushed over to his side and began doing emergency healing spells. Harry doubted that it would amount to anything. Molly let out a strangled cry and rushed into the duel upon seeing her second son go down. Fred and George came in behind her, both twins wearing identical murderous expressions. Ron screamed in rage and charged in brandishing his mace. Albus drew his wand and summoned Fawkes to his side as he started towards the inevitable

slaughter, speaking to Harry in a neutral tone, almost as though regarding him as an equal rather than a child or a subordinate.

“I do not sense Tom’s body here. Something must be channeling his magic. Search it out and destroy it. I shall handle Voldemort.”

Harry bristled and made to argue at once, not at all liking to be given instructions and especially not wanting to be somewhere else while Ron and the others got maimed. But on a moment’s thought he had to admit that the old man was making sense. Even should they attack him two on one, the battle wouldn’t end so long as Riddle’s necromantic magic was in the air and reviving the body. Tom was likely too smart and skilled to get caught by something that would compromise his vessel, and could easily choose another should Arthur’s corpse somehow be decimated. Merlin knew there was a large enough selection pool. He wanted the Weasleys to live, and he had to acknowledge that Albus was better equipped to stall the Dark Lord than he was at the moment.

His task given, Harry concentrated his eyes to view the magic in the air. Hitomi’s tracking classes back during the school term would actually amount to some good. She’d no doubt be delighted to hear the whole story later. Arthur’s body bore an opaque black aura identical to Riddle’s. An identical large tendril streaked away onto a hilltop in the near horizon, at which sat a glowing crystalline orb on a pedestal that was almost alive with dark magic and radiating it like signal waves. Voldemort’s essence originated at the orb and connected via the tendril beam to Arthur’s possessed corpse. This crystal sphere could only be the conduit through which Riddle was manipulating the battle. The diabolic instrument was surrounded on all sides by six Death Eater guards. He watched as Dumbledore entered the battle and blasted Voldemort in the blindside with Banishing Spell and then started towards the orb. And a moment later, time stopped moving.

“Reducto.”

Obsidian eyes widened in horror as the spell impacted her body with a sickening squelching sound, blasting out the skin on her entire right side. Blood sprayed out like a crimson geyser and she swooned on

the spot. As soon as Harry had cast his head in the orb's direction, the displaced Riddle had taken the initiative to stop him, conjuring several large serpents to distract Dumbledore and his other adversaries while sending a high-powered Reductor Curse in the warmonger's general direction. But rather than directing it at Harry who could easily evade, he had sent it straight at his beloved. The girl's back had been turned as she mended Katie Bell's thigh, which had taken a rather nasty cut at some point during the magical melee, and had managed to whirl about right in time to see her executioner. There hadn't been time to summon anything to block the spell's path. Harry could only concentrate his magic and attempt to divert the curse in that method. He managed to alter its trajectory enough to prevent her entire body being blown to kingdom come but it still hadn't been enough.

"Oh my God..."

All thoughts about battle cast aside, Harry rushed over to his dying consort's side. He didn't even see the inhuman sneer that crossed the corrupted Arthur Weasley's visage. Nor did he hear Hermione's scream or her and several others coming over as well. Her little hand was clammy and her breathing shallow, but he would not let this happen.

"Curage!"

The emergency healing spell, the only one that he knew, stemmed the coursing blood's tide an imperceptible amount, but it wasn't enough. Harry choked out a curse at his ineptitude and tried again, this time throwing everything he had behind the spell.

"CURAGE!"

The bleeding stopped at last, but still too late. Cho's body had gone into shock due to the blood loss. She would no doubt die unless she received medical attention at once. The problem was that she likely couldn't be moved either. Harry didn't understand all the medical technicalities, but common sense dictated that it would be unwise to Portkey with somebody in critical condition. But even so, she would surely perish here.

“I’m taking her to St. Mungo’s. She isn’t going to survive like this.”

The demon hybrid’s voice was hollow, but inside he was bursting with rage. He couldn’t even strike at the perpetrator, seeing as Voldemort’s actual skeletal body was Merlin knows where. He would crush that bony mongrel into white powder the next time they met. The humiliation at Hogsmeade was one thing, but this was too much to bear.

“You will do no such thing, Potter. You are still needed here.”

Harry glared up at the speaker, forest green eyes brimming with hate.

“I’m not going to sit idly by here and watch my fiancée die in the cold, Minerva.”

His one-time Head of House didn’t give an inch at his harsh tone, however.

“These people will die without you. You are so quick to criticize Albus, but you are proving to be worse than him. Making these tough decisions is what being a leader is all about. Miss Chang is more than likely going to die, Harry. There is nothing you can do to change that now. Think about all those who can still be saved here and are depending on you to do it.”

Still Harry remained obstinate and unwilling to abandon Cho, almost clinging to some ridiculous hope that his mere presence would help her through the shock and save her. Somewhere in his mind he knew that these sentimental attitudes were indeed what he had sneered at Dumbledore so many times in the past over. Still, he couldn’t get over having again lost somebody dear to him. Remus was bad enough, but this was so much worse. He opened his mouth to roar back his response to McGonagall when a red blur appeared next to him.

“...Fawkes...”

Dumbledore’s phoenix ignored Harry, haughtily shaking his head and bending down over Cho’s gaping wound. Despite all the indignities

that the young warlord had heaped upon his master, the great bird was still willing to help him here. He was almost touched by the gesture. Fawkes shed several tears over the gash. The wound steamed and hissed as it healed over, leaving a noticeable scar along her side where the repairing skin joined. Slowly her breathing stabilized, but she remained unconscious. He tried to stroke Fawkes in gratitude, but the bird avoided his touch as though he were diseased. Harry understood the meaning. He had descended too deep into the darkness to be allowed to touch a light creature like the phoenix. He didn't really care. As long as the people he cared about were alive and well, he had no regrets about the path he'd chosen.

"She 'as lost too much blood, but she will survive. Phoenix Tears are most magnifique."

Harry hadn't even noticed Fleur coming over. She was much more knowledgeable about healing and medicine than he was, so he trusted her opinion. He considered asking her about Charlie's condition, but there was no time. He had squandered too much obsessing over Cho. He shed his black mourning robes, and wrapped the unconscious girl in them to prevent any complications due to the cold, leaving him dressed only in his trousers. His exposed wings drew some reactions among those who were unaware that he wasn't entirely human, but he had no reason to be concerned with that. His lip curled as he turned back to McGonagall.

"Since I'm going up the hill, you're going to protect Cho while I'm gone."

"Rest assured, I will not allow her to come to any harm."

"See that she doesn't. Otherwise, you won't be the only one to pay the consequences."

Harry turned to depart, nearly whipping a wing in the Transfiguration Master's eyes. He'd let her wonder about what his threat meant. The sheer raw magic in the air around the hill would block his Portkey, meaning that he'd have to make his approach the traditional way. His last action prior to leaving was summoning his two tiger guardians and ordering them to stand vigil around Cho. He didn't believe that

the perennial Gryffindor that was Minerva McGonagall would let anything happen to her, but a little extra security couldn't hurt.

"Please be cautious, 'Arry. Do not get 'urt."

Fleur leaned over and gently pecked him on the mouth. The young wizard only sent her an odd look in response and went on his way. Her mouth tasted like pure vanilla. He charged at his utmost speed up the hillside, summoning the Demarr Devil Blade as he moved, outstretching his arm and holding the cursed brand perpendicular to his shirtless body. He could see the Death Eaters moving to intercept his assault. Futile...there were but six, and all save one were grunts. The commander was an Inner Circle member, one more to dispatch. He noticed that the leader had been scribbling on a parchment moments prior, having dropped it only to react to his position being assailed. The commander opened up with an Imperius Curse. Harry did nothing to react save allowing the spell to collide with his weapon. The blade absorbed the magic as he closed in, and the Inner Circle member was too stumped by the inconceivable phenomenon to react. Harry reached his position and pulled his blade back, and then swung and cleaved the man in twain at the waist. Pathetic, he hadn't even needed to cast a single spell. The grunts looked at one another and retreated in disorder upon seeing their leader slain in mere seconds. Looking at the dead man's head, Harry recognized him as the man who had told Voldemort how to get at the Prophecy during his previous year: Augustus Rookwood, the one-time Unspeakable. A mere researcher, hardly a worthy opponent.

Harry took a moment to admire his handiwork as he picked up Rookwood's parchment, blood and organs spilling out through both halves. He purposely stepped on the disgraced Unspeakable's colon as he passed over the destroyed body, wrinkling his nose with a sneer as the not yet excreted shite squeezed out all over the snow. And then, the orb. It would be elementary to destroy the magical object with the devil blade, but Harry wanted to do it by his own hand. He grasped at the Dark Lord's conduit with his claw arm. The magic hummed and attempted to resist. That couldn't be allowed. This was about pride and dominance. Harry needed to prove that his magic was greater than Voldemort's. He concentrated his chaotic magic into the claw and squeezed. The orb cracked and hostile magic leaked

out. Pain coursed through Harry as the evil energy surged into his body, but he wouldn't give in. He sent all the energy he could muster into the claw and clamped down with all his might.

"I won't be beaten this time. I'm greater than you, Tom, and I'm going to prove it."

At last the orb gave in, splintering and dissipating in a sheer magical explosion that sent Harry soaring back through the air down the hill. He collided with a thud against a large memorial, crushing his wings against his back and bruising them and also knocking his cranium hard. He might well have a concussion due to the impact. He glared up at the audacious monument and scowled at what he saw: a replica Triwizard Cup. He had collided with Cedric Diggory's grave. He looked down and saw a partially exposed corpse, its head and torso above the snow. Familiar stormy grey eyes stared out aimlessly. Cedric's body was being animated right as Harry stopped the necromancy. The winged demon used the replica trophy as a brace and scrambled upright.

"Enjoy the view down there, Caddy. I'm about to go cuddle with your beloved. Assuming she's awake, that is."

He walked a distance chuckling mirthlessly. He hadn't gone much distance when he sensed Dumbledore walking up beside him. He really didn't want to chat with the old coot right now. He wanted to get Cho home and dose her up with blood restoratives and then go to sleep. He was still a bit woozy due to crashing into that troll Diggory's memorial.

"You did well, Harry. I would not have been able to endure Voldemort much longer."

"That's bollocks. He was in Mr. Weasley's body. Surely his strength was compromised."

Albus let out a sigh and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"To a degree, yes, but his stamina and physical mobility were also increased."

Harry surveyed the now motionless corpses when a thought came to his mind.

“You know, it’s a bit strange. We two were both here, as was the Minister and several other important people in our society. Voldemort only attacked us with his necromancy. Had I been in his position, I would have ordered every available wand in my army here to wipe us out. It appears as though he was only trying to stall us while his real target was elsewhere, exactly like on Halloween with Hogsmeade and Azkaban.”

The old man turned ashen in an instant, arriving at the same conclusion as Harry.

“Hogwarts. He is attacking the castle in my absence.”

And that was the secondary reason why Harry had gotten the Order disbanded. Any time Dumbledore was not at Hogwarts was a time where both the school and the students inside were open to attack. Naturally, the main reason was that he simply didn’t want them getting in his way later on.

“Better get back to your school while you still can, Dumbledore.”

“Indeed I must. Please relay the unpleasant news to the others, Harry.”

Dumbledore called Fawkes and disappeared in an instant. Let the old man handle it. Actually having the school under attack would teach him a good lesson, and it was his responsibility anyway. Maybe now he’d spend more time warding and overseeing the place and less time meddling in issues outside. Harry wasn’t at all worried that the castle would be taken. Voldemort would have to lead that attack personally to achieve any success, and he obviously wasn’t seeing as he had been occupied with channeling magic into the cemetery. His Death Eaters were much too incompetent to even manage to breach the gates. Albus would rout them upon his return, and Harry had other business here to attend to. These corpses would have to be cremated lest Riddle employ them in his vile plots again. The

young warlord sneered as he glimpsed Fudge barking out orders and strutting about like the man in charge now that the danger had passed. That idiot was going to have to be put aside and quick. Cornelius Fudge was not a wartime leader, and nothing would ever get done properly as long as he was steering the ship. He sighed and ran an exasperated hand through his hair as the man came waddling in his direction, yelling about something or another. He really needed to take a nap.

(End Chapter Twenty-Eight)

Author's Note: Another two months...gone. Seriously, I have been hard pressed to dredge up and enthusiasm to write this story lately, and I'm not at all pleased with this update. I know there's some more stuff I should have covered at the end, such as the overall aftermath of the battle, but I'll let you all stew over that until the next chapter. I'm such a nice guy, huh? It will hopefully come sooner than the last, but I'm not setting a timeframe (it seems to be almost a jinx, I set a few days for the last and it took over two months). I've just been busy and devoted in large to my Naruto story, and I now haven't even updated THAT in a month. Anyway, probably not my best battle scene, but there's only so much I can do with a horde of zombies. Next chapter will cover the fallout from this day's events as well as perhaps a counterattack (Harry's got to take the offensive at some point). Chapter after will likely be his wedding ceremony and the political maneuvering therein. That's about it...read and review as always, please. Much appreciated.

Now, in a slight edit, I think I should explain why the resurrected dead were able to use magic to an extent. When a wizard dies, some of his or her soul remains in their body, in essence part of their magical core. That is, unless they were killed in such a way that destroys the soul entirely (read: Avada Kedavra or the Dementor's Kiss). Therefore, once raised via true necromancy (not the Inferi way, which consumes that soul in exchange for the one-time raising), they can still do their magic to a degree unless that soul part is destroyed, like when Harry used the AK on that one witch, she had no magic and attacked with her hands the second time up. So, had Cedric come up to battle, he would not have had his magic, since he was slain via the Killing Curse back during the Third Task and his soul was destroyed.